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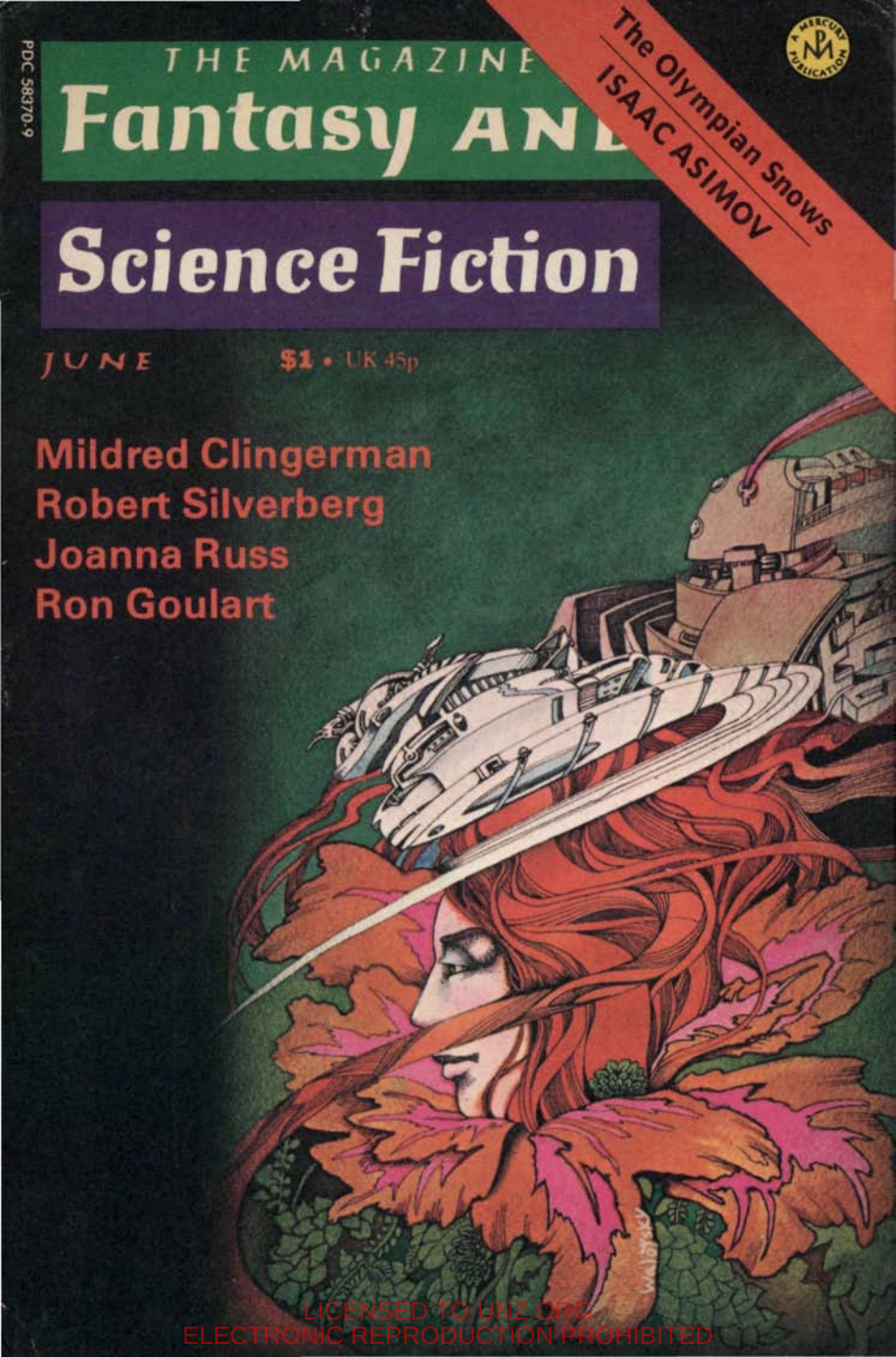

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THE FOREVER WAR

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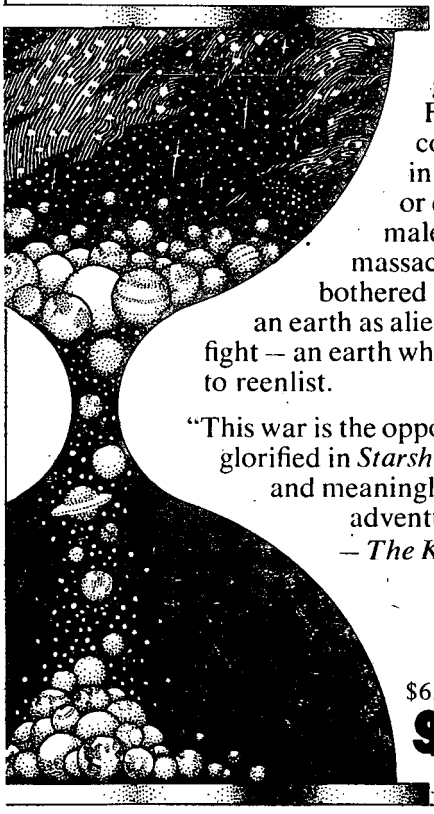

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John Varley's third story for F&SF ("Picnic On Paradise," Aug. 1974; "Retrograde Summer," Feb. 1975) is an inventive and suspenseful tale about the inhabitants of two space stations, who are faced with the terror of loneliness, until something worse comes along . . .

The Black Hole Passes

by JOHN VARLEY

Jordan looked up from the log of the day's transmissions and noted with annoyance that Treemonisha was lying with her legs half-buried in the computer console. He couldn't decide why that bothered him so much, but it did. He walked over to her and kicked her in the face to get her attention, his foot sailing right through her as if she wasn't there, which she wasn't. He waited, tapping his foot, for her to notice it.

Twenty seconds later she jumped, then looked sheepish.

"You blinked," Jordan crowed. "You blinked. You owe me another five dollars." Again he waited, not even conscious of waiting. After a year at the station he had reached the point where his mind simply edited out the twenty-second time-lag. Given the frantic pace of life at the station, there was little chance he would miss anything.

"All right, so I blinked. I'm getting tired of that game. Besides, all you're doing is wiping out your old debts. You owe me... $455 now instead of $460."

"You liked it well enough when you were *winning*," he pointed out. "How else could you have gotten into me for that kind of money, with my reflexes?"

(Wait) "I think the totals show who has the faster reflexes. But I told you a week ago that I don't appreciate being bothered when I'm reading." She waved her fac-printed book, her thumb holding her place.

"Oh, listen to you. Pointing out to me what you don't like, while you're all spread out through my computer. You *know* that drives me up the wall."

(Wait) She looked down at where her body vanished into the side of the computer, but instead of apologizing, she flared up.

"Well, so what? I never heard

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of such foolishness; walking around chalk marks on the floor all the time so I won't melt into your precious furniture. Who ever heard of such..." She realized she was repeating herself. She wasn't good at heated invective, but had been getting practice at improving it in the past weeks. She got up out of the computer and stood glowering at Jordan, or glowering at where he had been.

Jordan had quickly scanned around his floor and picked out an area marked off with black tape. He walked over to it and stepped over the lines and waited with his arms crossed, a pugnacious scowl on his face.

"How do you like that?" he spat out at her. "I've been very scrupulous about avoiding objects in your place. Chalk marks, indeed. If you used tape like I told you, you wouldn't be rubbing them off all the time with that fat ass of yours." But she had started laughing after her eyes followed to where he was now standing, and it soon got out of control. She doubled over, threatened to fall down she laughed so hard. He looked down and tried to remember what it was that the tape marked off at her place. Was that where she kept the toilet...?

He jumped hastily out of the invisible toilet and was winding up a scathing remark, but she had stopped laughing. The remarks about the fat ass had reached her, and her reply had crawled back at the speed of light.

As he listened to her, he realized anything he could say would be superfluous; she was already as angry as she could be. So he walked over to the holo set and pressed a switch. The projection he had been talking to zipped back into the tank, to become a ten-centimeter angry figure, waving her arms at him.

He saw the tiny figure stride to her own set and slap another button. The tank went black. He noticed with satisfaction just before she disappeared that she had lost her place in the book.

Then, in one of the violent swings of mood that had been scaring him to death recently, he was desolately sorry for what he had done. His hands trembled as he pressed the call button, and he felt the sweat popping out on his forehead. But she wasn't receiving.

"Great. One neighbor in half a billion kilometers, and I pick a fight with her."

He got up and started his ritual hunt for a way of killing himself that wouldn't be so grossly bloody that it would make him sick. Once again he came to the conclusion that there wasn't anything like that in the station.

"Why couldn't they think of things like that?" he fumed. "No

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drugs, no poison gas, no nothing. Damn air system has so goddam many safeties on the damn thing I couldn't raise the CO2 count in here if my life depended on it. Which it *does*. If I don't find a painless way to kill myself, it's going to drive me to suicide."

He broke off, not only because he had played back that last rhetorical ramble, but because he was never comfortable hearing himself talk to himself. It sounded too much like a person on the brink of insanity.

"Which I *am!*"

It felt a bit better to have admitted it out loud. It sounded like a very sane thing to say. He grasped the feeling, built steadily on it until it began to feel natural. After a few minutes of deep breathing he felt something approximating calm. Calmly, he pressed the call button again, to find that Treemonisha was still not at home. Calmly, he built up spit and fired it at the innocent holo tank, where it dripped down obscenely. He grinned. Later he could apologize, but right now it seemed to be the right course to stay angry.

He walked back to the desk and sat down before the computer digest of the three trillion bits that had come over the Hotline in the last twenty-four hours. Here was where he earned his salary. There was an added incentive in the realization that Treemonisha had not yet started her scan of her own computer's opinions for the day. Maybe he could scoop her again.

Jordan Moon was the station agent for Star Line, Inc., one of the two major firms in the field of interstellar communication. If you can call listening in on a party line communication.

He lived and worked in a station that had been placed in a slow circular orbit thirteen billion kilometers from the sun. It was a lonely area; it had the sole virtue of being right in the center of the circle of greatest signal strength of the Ophiuchi Hotline.

About all that anyone had ever known for sure about the Ophiuchites was the fact that they had one hell of a big laser somewhere in their planetary system, 70 Ophiuchi. Aside from that, which they couldn't very well conceal, they were an extremely close-mouthed race. They never volunteered anything about themselves directly, and human civilization was too parsimonious to ask. Why build a giant laser, the companies asked when it was suggested, when all that lovely information floods through space for free?

Jordan Moon had always thought that an extremely good question, but he turned it around:

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why did the *Ophiuchites* bother to build a giant laser? What did they get out of it? No one had the slightest idea, not even Jordan, who fancied himself an authority on everything.

He was not far wrong, and that was his value to the company.

No one had yet succeeded in making a copyright stand up in court when applied to information received over the Hotline. The prevailing opinion was that it was a natural resource, like vacuum, and free to all who could afford the expense of maintaining a station in the cometary zone. The expense was tremendous, but the potential rewards were astronomical. There were fifteen companies elbowing each other for a piece of the action, from the giants like Star Line and HotLine, Ltd., down to several free-lancers who paid holehunters to listen in when they were in the vicinity.

But the volume of transmissions was enough to make a board chairman weep and develop ulcers. And the aliens, with what the company thought was boorish inconsideration, insisted on larding the valuable stuff with quintillions of bits of gibberish that might be poetry or might be pornography or recipes or pictures or who-knew-what that the computers had never been able to unscramble and had given a few that chewed it over too long the galloping jitters. The essential problem was that ninety-nine percent of what the aliens thought worth sending over the Line was trash to humans. But that one per cent...

... the Symbiotic Spacesuits, that had made it possible for a human civilization to inhabit the Rings of Saturn with no visible means of support, feeding, respirating, and watering each other in a closed-ecology daisy chain.

... the Partial Gravitational Rigor, which made it possible to detect and hunt and capture quantum black holes and make them sit up and do tricks for you, like powering a space drive.

... Macromolecule Manipulation, without which people would die after only two centures of life.

... Null-field and all the things it had made possible.

Those were the large, visible things that had changed human life in drastic amounts but had not made anyone huge fortunes simply because they were so big that they quickly diffused through the culture because of their universal application. The real money was in smaller, patentable items, like circuitry, mechanical devices, chemistry, and games.

It was Jordan's job to sift those few bits of gold from the oceans of gossip or whatever it was that poured down the Line every day.

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And to do it before Treemonisha and his other competitors. If possible, to find things that Treemonisha missed entirely. He was aided by a computer that tirelessly sorted and compared to dump the more obvious chaff before printing out a large sheet of things it thought might be of interest.

Jordan scanned that sheet each day, marking out items and thinking about them. He had a lot to think about, and a lot to think with. He was an encyclopedic synthesist, a man with volumes of major and minor bits and pieces of human knowledge and the knack of putting it together and seeing how it might fit with the new stuff from the Line. When he saw something good, he warmed up his big laser and fired it off special delivery direct to Pluto. Everything else — including the things the computer had rejected as nonsense, because you never could tell what the monster brains on Luna might pick out of it on the second or third go-round — he recorded on a chip the size of a flyspeck and loaded it into a tiny transmitter and fired it off parcel post in a five-stage, high-gee message rocket. His aim didn't have to be nearly as good as the Ophiuchites; a few months later, the payload would streak by Pluto and squeal out its contents in the two minutes it was in radio range of the big dish.

"I wish their aim had been a *little* better," he groused to himself as he went over the printout for the fourth time. He knew it was nonsense, but he felt like grousing.

The diameter of the laser beam by the time it reached Sol was half a billion kilometers. The center of the beam was twice the distance from Pluto to the sun, a distance amounting to about twenty seconds of arc from 70 Ophiuchi. But why aim it at the sun? No one listening there. Where would the logical place be to aim a message laser?

Jordan was of the opinion that the aim of the Ophiuchites was better than the company president gave them credit for. Out here, there was very little in the way of noise to garble the transmissions. If they had directed the beam through the part of the solar system where planets are most likely to be found —where they all *are* found—the density of expelled solar gases would have played hob with reception. Besides, Jordan felt that none of the information would have been much good to planet-bound beings, anyway. Once humanity had developed the means of reaching the cometary zone and found that messages were being sent out there rather than to the Earth, where everyone had always expected to find them, they were in

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a position to utilize the information.

"They knew what they were doing, all right," he muttered, but the thought died away as something halfway down the second page caught his eye. Jordan never knew for *sure* just what he was seeing in the digests. Perhaps a better way to make cyanide stew, or advice to lovelorn Ophiuchites. But he could spot when something might have relevance to his own species. He was good at his work. He looked at the symbols printed there, and decided they might be of some use to a branch of genetic engineering.

Ten minutes later, the computer had lined up the laser and he punched the information into it. The lights dimmed as the batteries were called upon to pour a large percentage of their energy into three spaced pulses, five seconds apart. Jordan yawned, and scratched himself. Another day's work done; elapsed time, three hours. He was doing well — that only left twenty-one hours before he had anything else he needed to do.

Ah, leisure.

He approached the holo tank again and with considerable trepidation pressed the call button. He was afraid to think of what he might do if Treemonisha did not answer this time.

"You had no call to say what you said," she accused, as she appeared in the tank.

"You're absolutely right," he said, quickly. "It was uncalled for, and untrue. Tree, I'm going crazy, I'm not myself. It was a childish insult and you know it was without basis in fact."

She decided that was enough in the way of apology. She touched the projection button and joined him in the room. So beautiful, so alive, and so imaginary he wanted to cry again. Jordan and Treemonisha were the system's most frustrated lovers. They had never met in the flesh, but had spent a year together by holo projection.

Jordan knew every inch of Treemonisha's body, ever pore, every hair. When they got unbearably horny, they would lie side by side on the floor and look at each other. They would strip for each other, taking hours with each garment. They developed the visual and oral sex fantasy to a pitch so fine that it was their own private language. They would sit inches apart and pass their hands close to each other, infinitely careful never to touch and spoil the illusion. They would talk to each other, telling what they would do when they finally got together in person, then they would sit back and masturbate themselves into insensibility.

"You know," Treemonisha said, "you were a lousy choice for this job. You look like shit, you

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know that? I worry about you, this isolation is... well, it's not good for you."

"Driving me crazy, right?" He watched her walk to one of the taped-off areas on his floor and sit; as she touched the chair in her room, the holo projector picked it up and it winked into existence in his world. She was wearing a red paper blouse but had left off the pants, as a reproach, he thought, and a reminder of how baseless his gibe had been. She raised her left index finger three times. That was the signal for a scenario — "Captain Future Meets the Black Widow," one of his favorites. They had evolved the hand signals when they grew impatient with asking each other "Do you want to play 'Antony and Cleopatra'?" one of *her* favorites.

He waved his hand, negating his opening lines. He was impatient with the games and fantasies. He was getting impatient with everything. Besides, she wasn't wearing her costume for the Black Widow.

"I think you're wrong," he said. "I think I was the perfect choice for this job. You know what I did after you shut off? I went looking for a way to kill myself."

For once, he noticed the pause. She sat there in her chair, mouth slightly open, eyes unfocused, looking like she was about to drool all over her chin. Once they had both been fascinated with the process by which their minds suspended operations during the time-lag that was such a part of their lives. He had teased her about how stupid she looked when she waited for his words to catch up to her. Then once he had caught himself during one of the lags and realized he was a slack-jawed imbecile, too. After that, they didn't talk about it.

She jerked and came to life again, like a humanoid robot that had just been activated.

"Jordan! Why did you do that?" She was half out of the chair in a reflex comforting gesture, then suppressed it before she committed the awful error of trying to touch him.

"The point is, I didn't. Try it sometime. I found nine dozen ways of killing myself. It isn't hard to do, I'm sure you can see that. But, you see, they have gauged me to a nicety. They know exactly what I'm capable of, and what I can never do. If I could kill myself painlessly, I would have done it three months ago, when I first started looking. But the most painless way I've doped out yet still involves explosive decompression. I don't have the guts for it."

"But surely you've thought of... ah, never mind."

"You mean you've thought of a way?" He didn't know what to

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think. He had been aware for a long time that she was a better synthesist than he; the production figures and several heated communications from the home office proved that. She could put nothing and nothing together and arrive at answers that astounded him. What's more, her solutions worked. She seldom sent anything over her laser that didn't bear fruit and often saw things he had overlooked.

"Maybe I have," she evaded "but if I did, you don't think I'd tell you after what you just said. Jordan, I don't want you to kill yourself. That's not fair. Not until we can get together and you try to live up to all your boasting. After that, well, maybe you'll *have* to kill yourself."

He smiled at that, and was grateful she was taking the light approach. He *did* get carried away describing the delights she was going to experience as soon as they met in the flesh.

"Give me a hint," he coaxed. "It must involve the life system, right? It stands to reason, after you rule out the medical machines, which no one, *no* one could fool into giving out a dose of cyanide. Let's see, maybe I should take a closer look at that air intake. It stands to reason that I could get the CO2 count in here way up if I could only..."

"No!" she exploded, then listened to the rest of his statement. "No hints. I don't know a way. The engineers who built these things were too smart, and they knew some of us would get depressed and try to kill ourselves. There's no wrenches you could throw into the works that they haven't already thought of and countered. You just have to wait it out."

"Six more months," he groaned. "What does that come to in seconds?"

"Twenty less than when you asked the question, and didn't that go fast?"

Looked at that way, he had to admit it did. He experienced no subjective time between the question and the answer. If only he could edit out days and weeks as easily as seconds.

"Listen, honey, I want to do anything I can to help you. Really, would it help if I tried harder to stay out of your furniture?"

He sighed, not really interested in that anymore. But it would be something to do.

"All right."

So they got together, and she carefully laid out strips of tape on her floor marking the locations of objects in his room. He coached her, since she could see nothing of his room except him. When it was done, she pointed out that she could not get into her bedroom without walking through his

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auxiliary coelostat. He said that was all right as long as she avoided everything else.

When they were through, he was as depressed as ever. Watching her crawl around on her hands and knees made him ache for her. She was so lovely, and he was so lonely. The way her hair fell in long, ashen streams over the gathered materials of her sleeves, the curl of her toes as she knelt to peel off a strip of tape, the elastic give and take of the tendons in her legs... all the myriad tiny details he knew so well and didn't know at all. The urge to reach out and touch her was overpowering.

"What would you like to do today?" she said when they were through with the taping.

"I don't know. Everything I *can't* do."

"Would you like me to tell you a story?"

"No."

"Would you tell *me* a story?" She crossed her legs nervously. She didn't know how to cope with him when he got in these unresponsive moods.

Treemonisha was not subject to the terrors of loneliness that were tearing Jordan apart. She got along quite well by herself, aside from the sometimes maddening sexual pressures. But masturbation satisfied her more than it did Jordan. She expected no problems waiting out the six months until they were rotated back to Pluto. There was even a pleasurable aspect of the situation for her: the breathless feeling of anticipation waiting for the moment when they would finally be in each other's arms.

Jordan was no good at all at postponing his wants. Those wants, surprisingly to him, were not primarily sexual. He longed to be surrounded by people. To be elbow to elbow in a crowd, to smell the human smell of them around him, to be jostled, even shoved. Even to be punched in the face if necessary. But to be *touched* by another human being. It didn't have to be Treemonisha, though she was his first choice. He loved her, even when he yelled at her for being so maddeningly insubstantial.

"All right, I'll tell you a story." He fell silent, trying to think of one that had some aspect of originality. He couldn't, and so he fell back on "The Further Exploits of the Explorers of the Pink Planet." For that one, Treemonisha had to take off all her clothes and lie on her back on the floor. He sat very close to her and put the trio of adventures through their paces.

Captain Rock Rogers, commander of the expedition, he who had fearlessly led the team over yawning wrinkles and around pores sunk deep into the treacherous surface of the pink planet. The

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conqueror of Leftbreast Mountain, the man who had first planted the flag of the United Planets on the dark top of that dangerously unstable prominence and was planning an assault on the fabled Rightbreast Mountain, home of the savage tribe of killer microbes. Why?

"Because it's there," Treemonisha supplied.

"Who's telling this story?"

Doctor Maryjane Peters, who single-handedly invented the epidermal polarizer that caused the giant, radioactive, mutated crab lice to sink into the epithelium on the trio's perilous excursion into the Pubic Jungle.

"I still think you made that up about the crab lice."

"I reports what I sees. Shut up, child."

And Trog, half man, half slime mold, who had used his barbarian skills to domesticate Jo-jo, the man-eating flea, but who was secretly a spy for the Arcturian Horde and was working to sabotage the expedition and the hopes of all humanity.

As we rejoin the adventurers, Maryjane tells Rock that she must again venture south, from their base at the first sparse seedlings of the twisted Pubic Jungle, or their fate is sealed.

"Why is that, my dear?" Rock says boyishly.

"Because, darling, down at the bottom of the Great Rift Valley lie the only deposits of rare musketite on the whole planet, and I must have some of it to repair the burnt-out de-noxifier on the overdrive, or the ship will never..."

Meanwhile, back at reality, Treemonisha caused her Left Northern Promontory to move southwards and rub itself lightly through the Great Rift Valley, causing quite an uproar among the flora and fauna there.

"Earthquake!" Trog squeaks, and runs howling back toward safety in the great crater in the middle of the Plain of Belly.

"Strictly speaking, no," Maryjane points out, grabbing at a swaying tree to steady herself. "It might more properly be called a Treemonisha-qua —"

"Treemonisha. Must you do that while I'm just getting into the story? It plays hell with the plot line."

She moved her hand back to her side and tried to smile. She was willing to patronize him, try to get him back to himself, but this was asking a lot. What were these stories for, she reasoned, but to get her horny and give her a chance to get some relief?

"All right, Jordan. I'll wait."

He stared silently down at her. And a tear trembled on the tip of his nose, hung there, and fell down

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toward her abdomen. And of course it didn't get her wet. It was followed by another, and another, and still she wasn't wet, and he felt his shoulders begin to shake. He fell forward onto the soft, inviting surface of her body and bumped his head hard on the deck. He screwed his eyes shut tight so he couldn't see her and cried silently.

After a few helpless minutes, Treemonisha got up and left him to recover in privacy.

Treemonisha called several times over the next five days. Each time Jordan told her he wanted to be alone. That wasn't strictly true; he wanted company more than he could say, but he had to try isolation and see what it did to him. He thought of it as destructive testing — a good principle for engineering but questionable for mental equilibrium. But he had exhausted everything else.

He even called up The Humanoid, his only other neighbor within radio range. He and Treemonisha had named him that because he looked and acted so much like a poorly constructed robot. The Humanoid was the representative of Lasercom. No one knew his name, if he had one. When Jordan had asked passing holehunters about him, they said he had been out in that neighborhood for over twenty years, always refusing rotation.

It wasn't that The Humanoid was unfriendly; he just wasn't much of anything at all. When Jordan called him, he answered the call promptly, saying nothing. He never initiated anything. He would answer your questions with a yes or a no or an I-don't-know. If the answer required a sentence, he said nothing at all.

Jordan stared at him and threw away his plan of isolating himself for the remainder of his stay at the station.

"That's me in six months," he said, cutting the connection without saying good-by, and calling Treemonisha.

"Will you have me back?" he asked.

"I wish I could reach out and grab you by the ears and shake some sense back into you. Look," she pointed to where she was standing. "I've avoided your tape lines for five days, though it means threading a maze when I want to get to something. I was afraid you'd call me and I'd pop out in the middle of your computer again and freak you."

He looked ashamed; he *was* ashamed. Why did it matter?

"Maybe it isn't so important after all."

She lay down on the floor.

"I've been dying to hear how the story came out," she said. "You

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want to finish it now?"

So he dug out Rock Rogers and Maryjane and sent them into the bushes and, to enliven things, threw in Jo-jo and his wild mate, Gi-gi.

For two weeks, Jordan fought down his dementia. He applied himself to the computer summaries, forcing himself to work at them twice as long as was his custom. All it did was reconfirm to him that if he didn't see something in three hours, he wasn't going to see it at all.

Interestingly enough, the computer sheets were getting gradually shorter. His output dwindled as he had less and less to study. The home office didn't like it and suggested he do some work on the antennas to see if there was something cutting down on the quality of the reception. He tried it, but was unsurprised when it changed nothing.

Treemonisha had noticed it, too, and had run an analysis on her computer.

"Something is interfering with the signal," she told him after studying the results. "It's gotten bad enough that the built-in redundancy isn't sufficient. Too many things are coming over in fragmentary form, and the computer can't handle them."

She was referring to the fact that everything that came over the Hotline was repeated from ten to thirty times. Little of it came through in its totality, but by adding the repeats and filling in the blanks the computer was able to construct a complete message ninety percent of the time. That average had dropped over the last month to fifty per cent, and the curve was still going down.

"Dust cloud?" Jordan speculated.

"I don't think it could move in that fast. The curve would be much shallower, on the order of hundreds of years before we would really notice a drop-off."

"Something else, then." He thought about it. "If it's not something big, like a dust cloud blocking the signal, then it's either a drop-off in power at the transmitter, or it could be something distorting the signal. Any ideas?"

"Yes, but its very unlikely, so I'll think about it some more."

She exasperated him sometimes with her unwillingness to share things like that with him. But it was her right, and he didn't probe.

Three days later Treemonisha suddenly lost a dimension. She was sitting there in the middle of his room when her image flattened out like a sheet of paper, perpendicular to the floor. He saw her edge-on and had to get up and walk around

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the flat image to really see it.

"I'll call it 'Nude Sitting in a Chair,'" he said. "Tree, you're a cardboard cutout."

She looked up at him warily, hoping this wasn't the opening stanza in another bout with loneliness.

"You want to explain that?"

"Gladly. My receiver must be on the fritz. Your image is only two-dimensional now. Would you like to stand up?"

She grinned, and stood. She turned slowly, and the plane remained oriented the same way but different parts of her were now flattened. He decided he didn't like it, and got out his tools.

Two hours of checking circuitry told him nothing at all. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with the receiver, and when she checked her transmitter, the result was the same. Midway through the testing she reported that his image had flattened out, too.

"It looks like there really is something out there distorting signals," she said. "I think I'll sign off now, I want to check something." And with that she cut transmission.

He didn't care for the abruptness of that and was determined that she wouldn't beat him to the punch in finding out what it was. She could only be searching for the source of the distortion, which meant she had a good idea of what to look for.

"If she can figure it out, so can I." He sat down and thought furiously. A few minutes later, he got up and called her again.

"A black hole," she said, when she arrived. "I found it, or at least a close approximation of where it must be."

"I was going to say that," he muttered. But he hadn't found it. He had only figured out what it must be. She had known that three days ago.

"It's pretty massive," she went on. "The gravity waves were what fouled up our reception, and now it's close enough to ruin our transmissions to each other. I thought at first I might be rich, but it looks far too big to handle."

That was why she hadn't said anything earlier. If she could locate it and get a track on it, she could charter a ship and come back to get it later. Black holes were fantastically valuable, if they were small enough to manipulate. They could also be fantastically dangerous....

"Just how big?" he asked.

"I don't know yet, except that it's too big to chase. I...."

Her image, already surreal enough from the flattening, fluttered wildly and dissolved. He was cut off.

He chewed his nails for the next

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hour, and when the call bell clanged, he almost injured himself getting to the set. She appeared in the room. She was three-dimensional again, wearing a spacesuit, and she didn't look too happy.

"What the hell happened? You didn't do that on purpose, did you? Because..."

"Shut up." She looked tired, like she had been working.

"The stresses... I found myself falling toward the wall, and the whole station shipped around it like *zzzip!* And all of a sudden everything was creaking and groaning like a haunted house. Bells clanging, lights... scared the *shit* out of me." He saw that she was shaking, and it was his turn to suffer the pain of not being able to get up and comfort her.

She got control again and went on.

"It was tidal strains, Jordan, like you read about that can wreck a holehunter if she's not careful. You don't dare get too close. It could have been a lot worse, but as it is, there was a slow blowout, and I only just got it under control. I'm going to stay in this suit for a while longer, because everything was bent out of shape. Not enough to see, but enough. Seams parted. Some glass shattered. Everything rigid was strained some. My laser is broken, and I guess every bit of precision equipment must be out of alignment. And my orbit was altered. I'm moving toward you slightly, but most of my motion is away from the sun."

"How fast?"

"Not enough to be in danger. I'll be in this general area when they get a ship out here to look for me. Oh, yes. You should get off a message as quick as you can telling Pluto what happened. I can't talk to them, obviously."

He did that, more to calm himself than because he thought it was that urgent. But he was wrong.

"I think it'll pass close to you, Jordan. You'd better get ready for it."

Jordan stood in front of the only port in the station, looking out at the slowly wheeling stars. He was wearing his suit, the first time he had had it on since he arrived. There had just been no need for it.

The Star Line listening post was in the shape of a giant dumbbell. One end of it was the fusion power plant, and the other was Jordan's quarters. A thousand meters away, motionless relative to the station, was the huge parabolic dish that did the actual listening.

"Why didn't they give these stations some means of movement?"

He was talking into his suit radio. Treemonisha's holo set had finally broken down and she could

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not patch it up. There were too many distorted circuits deep in its guts; too many resistances had been altered; too many microchips warped. He realized glumly that even if the passage of the hole left him unscathed he would not see her again until they were rescued.

"Too expensive," she said patiently. She knew he was talking just to keep calm and didn't begrudge providing a reassuring drone for him to listen to. "There's no need under normal circumstances to move the things once they're in place. So why waste mass on thrusters?"

"'Normal circumstances,'" he scoffed. "Well, they didn't think of everything, did they? Maybe there *was* a way I could have killed myself. You want to tell me what it was, before I die?"

"Jordan," she said gently, "think about it. Isn't it rather unlikely for a black hole to pass close enough to our positions to be a danger? People hunt them for years without finding them. Who expects them to come hunting *you?*"

"You didn't answer my question."

"After the passage, I promise. And don't worry. You know how unlikely it was for it to pass as close as it did to me. Have some faith in statistics. It's surely going to miss you by a wide margin."

But he didn't hear the last. The floor started vibrating slowly, in long, accelerating waves. He heard a sound, even through the suit, that reminded him of a rock crusher eating its way through a solid wall. Ghostly fingers plucked at him, trying to pull him backwards to the place where the hole must be, and the stars outside the port jerked in dance rhythms, slowing, stopping, turning the other way, sashaying up and down, then starting to whirl.

He was looking for something to grab onto when the port in front of him shattered into dust and he was expelled with a monstrous whoosh as everything in the station that wasn't bolted down tried to fit itself through that meter-wide hole. He jerked his hands up to protect his faceplate and hit the back of his head hard on the edge of the port as he went through.

The stars were spinning at a rate fast enough to make him dizzy. Or were the stars spinning *because* he was dizzy? He cautiously opened his eyes again, and they were still spinning.

His head was throbbing, but he couldn't sync the throb-rate with the pain. Therefore, he declaimed to himself, the stars *are* spinning. On to the next question. Where *am* I?

He had no answers and wished he could slip back into that

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comforting blackness. Blackness. Black.

He remembered and wished he hadn't.

"Treemonisha," he moaned. "Can you hear me?"

Evidently she couldn't. First order of business: stop the spin before my head unscrews. He carefully handled the unfamiliar controls of his suit jets, squirting streams of gas out experimentally until the stars slowed, slowed, and came to rest except for a residual drift that was barely noticeable.

"*Very* lonely out here," he observed. There was what must be the sun. It was bright enough to be, but he realized it was in the wrong place. It should be, now let's see, where? He located it, and it wasn't nearly as bright as the thing he had seen before.

"That's the hole," he said, with a touch of awe in his voice. Only one thing could have caused it to flare up like that.

The black hole that had wrecked his home was quite a large one, about as massive as a large asteroid. But with all that, it was much smaller than his station had been. Only a tiny fraction of a centimeter across, in fact. But at the "surface," the gravity was too strong to bear thinking about. The light he saw was caused by stray pieces of his station that had actually been swept up by the hole and were undergoing collapse into neutronium, and eventually would go even further. He wondered how much radiation he had been exposed to. Soon he realized it probably wouldn't matter.

There were a few large chunks of the station tumbling close to him, dimly visible in the starlight. He made out one of the three-meter rockets he used to send the day's output back to Pluto. For a wild second he thought he saw a way out of his predicament. Maybe he could work out a way of using it to propel him over to Treemonisha. Then he remembered he had worked all that out on the computer during one of his lonelier moments. Those rockets were designed for accelerating a pea-sized transmitter up to a tremendous velocity, and there was no provision for slowing it down again, or varying the thrust, or turning it on and off. It was useless to him. Even if he could rig it some way such that it would move him instead of drilling straight through his back, the delta-vee he could get from it was enough to let him reach Treemonisha in about three weeks. And that was far, far too long.

He started over to it, anyway. He was tired of hanging out there in space a billion kilometers from anything. He wanted to get close to it, to have something to look at.

He clanged onto it and slowly

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stopped its rotation. Then he clung to it tightly, like an injured monkey to a tree limb.

A day later he was still clinging, but he had thought of a better metaphor.

"Like a castaway clinging to a log," he laughed to himself. No, he wasn't sure he liked that better. If he cast loose from the rocket, nothing at all would happen to him. He wouldn't drown in salty seas or even choke on hard vacuum. He was like the monkey: very scared and not about to let go of the security that his limb afforded him.

"...calling. Treemonisha calling Jordan, please answer quickly if you can hear me, because I have the radio set to..."

He was too astounded to respond at once, and the voice faded out. Then he yelled until he was hoarse, but there was no answer. He abandoned himself to despair for a time.

Then he pulled himself together and puzzled out with what wits he had left what it was she might be doing. She was scanning the path of strewn debris with a tight radio beam, hoping he was one of the chunks of metal her radar told her was there. He must be alert and yell out the next time he heard her.

Hours later, he was trying to convince himself it hadn't been a hallucination.

"... hear me, because —"

"Treemonisha!"

"— I have the radio set to scan the wreckage of your station, and if you take your time, I won't hear you. Treemonisha call..."

It faded again, and he jittered in silence.

"Jordan, can you hear me now?" The voice wavered and faded, but it was there. She must be aiming by hand.

"I hear you. I figured it out."

"Figured what out?"

"Your painless way of committing suicide. But you were wrong. It's true that if I had stepped outside the station wearing my suit, I would have died of CO_2 poisoning eventually, but you were wrong if you thought I could take this isolation. I would have jetted back to the station in just a few hours..." His voice broke as he forced himself to look again at the bottomless depths that surrounded him.

"You always take the hard way, don't you?" she said, in a voice so gentle and sympathetic that she might have been talking to a child. "Why would you have to step out?"

"Aaaaa..." he gurgled. One step ahead again. Why step outside, indeed? Because that's what you *do* in a spacesuit. You don't wear it inside the station, sealed off from the fail-safe systems inside unless you want to die when the oxygen in your tanks runs out.

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I'm not that dense, and you know it. You want to tell me why I didn't see that? No, wait, don't. Don't outfigure me in that, too. I'll tell you why. Because I didn't really want to kill myself, right? If I had been sincere, I would have thought of it."

"That's what I finally hoped was the case. But I still didn't want to take the chance of telling you. You might have felt pressured to go through with it if you knew there was a way."

Something was nagging at him. He furrowed his brow to squeeze it out in the open, and he had it.

"The time-lag's shorter," he stated. "How far apart are we?"

"A little over two million kilometers, and still closing. The latest thing I can get out of my computer — which is working in fits and starts — is that you'll pass within about 1.5 million from me, and you'll be going five thousand per, relative."

She cleared her throat. "Uh, speaking of that, how much reserve do you have left?"

"Why bother yourself? I'll just fade away at the right time, and you won't have to worry because you know how long I have to live."

"I'd still like to know. I'd rather know."

"All right. The little indicator right here says my recyclers should keep right on chugging along for another five days. After that, no guarantees. Do you feel better now?"

"Yes, I do." She paused again. "Jordan, how badly do you need to talk to me right now? I can stay here as long as you need it, but there's a lot of work I have to do to keep this place running, and I can't afford the power drain to talk to you continuously for five days. The batteries are acting badly, and they really do need constant attention."

He tried not to feel hurt. Of course she was fighting her own fight to stay alive — she still had a chance. She wouldn't be Treemonisha if she folded up because the going got rough. The rescue ship would find her, he felt sure, working away to keep the machines going.

"I'm sure I can get along," he said, trying his best to keep the reproach out of his voice. He was ashamed at feeling that way, but he did. The bleak fact was that he had felt for a brief moment that dying wouldn't be so hard as long as he could talk to her. Now he didn't know.

"Well, hang on, then. I can call you twice a day if my figures are right and talk for an hour without draining too much power for what I have to do. Are you *sure* you'll be all right?"

"I'm sure," he lied.

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And he was right. He wasn't all right.

The first twelve-hour wait was a mixture of gnawing loneliness and galloping agoraphobia.

"About half one and half the other," he commented during one of his lucid moments. They were rare enough, and he didn't begrudge himself the luxury of talking aloud when he was sane enough to understand what he was saying.

And then Treemonisha called, and he leaked tears through the entire conversation, but they didn't enter into his voice, and she never suspected. They were happy tears, and they wet the inside of his suit with his boundless love for her.

She signed off, and he swung over to hating her, telling the uninterested stars how awful she treated him, how she was the most ungrateful sentient being from here to 70 Ophiuchi.

"She could spare the power to talk just a few minutes longer," he raged. "I'm *rotting* out here, and she has to go adjust the air flow into her bedroom or sweep up. It's so damn important, all that housekeeping, and she leaves me all alone."

Then he kicked himself for even thinking such things about her. Why should she put her life on the line, wasting power she needed to keep breathing just to talk to him?

"I'm dead already, so she's wasting her time. I'll tell her the next time she calls that she needn't call back."

That thought comforted him. It sounded so altruistic, and he was uncomfortably aware that he was liable to be pretty demanding of her. If she did everything he wanted her to, she wouldn't have any time to do anything else.

"How are you doing, Rock Rogers?"

"Treemonisha! How nice of you to call. I've been thinking of you all day long, just waiting for the phone to ring."

"Is that sincere, or are you hating me again today?"

He sobered, realizing that it might be hard for her to tell anymore, what with his manic swings in mood.

"Sincere. I'll lay it on the line, because I can't stand not talking about it anymore. Have you thought of anything, *anything* I might do to save myself? I've tried to think, but it seems I can't think in a straight line anymore. I get a glimpse of something, and it fades away. So I'll ask you. You were always faster than me in seeing a way to do something. What can I do?"

She was quiet for a long time.

"Here is what you *must* do. You must come to terms with your

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situation and stay alive as long as you can. If you keep panicking like you've been doing, you're going to open your exhaust and spill all your air. Then all bets are off."

"If you were betting, would you bet that it matters at all how much longer I stay alive?"

"The first rule of survival is never give up. *Never.* If you do, you'll never take advantage of the quirks of fate that can save you. Do you hear me?"

"Treemonisha, I won't hedge around it any longer. Are you doing something to save me? Have you thought of something? Just what 'quirks' did you have in mind?"

"I have something that might work. I'm not going to tell you what it is, because I don't trust you to remain calm about it. And that's all you're getting from me."

"Haven't you considered that not knowing will upset me more than knowing and worrying about it?"

"Yes," she said, evenly. "But frankly, I don't want you looking over my shoulder and jostling my elbow while I try to get this together. I'm doing what I can here, and I just told you what *you* have to do out *there.* That's all I can do for you, and you won't change it by trying to intimidate me with one of your temper tantrums. Go ahead, sound off all you want, tell me I'm being unfair, that you have a right to know. You're not rational, Jordan, and *you* are the one who has to get yourself out of that. Are you ready to sign off? I have a lot of work to do."

He admitted meekly that he was ready.

Her next call was even briefer. He didn't want to remember it, but he had whined at her, and she had snapped at him, then apologized for it, then snapped at him again when he wheedled her for just a teeny tiny hint.

"Maybe I was wrong, not telling you," she admitted. "But I know this: if I give in and tell you now, the next phone call will be full of crap from you telling me why my scheme won't work. Buck up, son. Tell yourself a story, recite prime numbers. Figure out why entropy runs down. Ask yourself what The Humanoid does. But don't *do* what he does. That isn't your style. I'll see you later."

The next twelve hours marked the beginning of rising hope for Jordan, tinged with the first traces of confidence.

"I think I might be able to hold out," he told the stars. He took a new look at his surroundings.

"You aren't so far away," he told the cold, impersonal lights. It sounded good, and so he went on with it. "Why, how can I feel you're so far away when I can't get any

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perspective on you? You might as well be specks on my faceplate. You *are* specks." And they were.

With the discovery that he had some control of his environment, he was emboldened to experiment with it. By using his imagination, he could move the stars from his faceplate to the far-away distance, hundreds of meters away. That made the room he was in a respectable size, but not overwhelming. He turned his imagination like a focusing knob, moving the stars and galaxies in and out, varying the size of space as he perceived it.

When she called again, he told her with some triumph that he no longer cared about the isolation he was floating in. And it was true. He had moved the stars back to their original positions, light-years away, and left them there. It no longer mattered.

She congratulated him tiredly. There was strain in her voice; she had been working hard at whatever mysterious labors had kept her from the phone. He no longer believed the story about maintenance occupying all her time. If that was true, when would she find time to work on rescuing him? The logic of that made him feel good all over.

He no longer clung to his bit of driftwood as an anchor against the loneliness. Rather, he had come to see it as a home base from which he could wander. He perched on it and looked out at the wide universe. He looked at the tiny, blinding spark that was the sun and wondered that all the bustling world of people he had needed so badly for so long could be contained in such a small space. He could put out his thumb and cover all the inner planets, and his palm took in most of the rest. Billions of people down there, packed solid, while he had this great black ocean to wallow around in.

Jordan's time was down to five hours. He was hungry, and the air in his helmet stank.

"The time," Treemonisha stated, "is fourteen o-clock, and all is well."

"Hmm? Oh, it's you. What is time?"

"Oh, brother. You're really getting into it, aren't you? Time is: the time for my twice-daily call to see how things are in your neck of space. How are you doing?"

"Wonderful. I'm at peace. When the oxygen runs out, I'll at least die a peaceful death. And I have you to thank for it."

"I always hoped I'd go kicking and screaming," she said. "And what's this about dying? I told you I had something going."

"Thank you, darling, but you don't need to carry on with that

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anymore. I'm glad you did, because for a time there if I hadn't thought you were working to save me, I never would have achieved the peace I now have. But I can see now that it was a device to keep me going, to steady me. And it worked, Tree, it worked. Now, before you sign off, would you take a few messages? The first one is to my mother. 'Dear mom...'"

"Hold on there. I refuse to hear anything so terribly personal unless there's a real need for it. Didn't I find a way for you to kill yourself after you had given it up? Don't I always pull more gold out of those transmissions than you do? *Haven't you noticed anything?*"

The time-lag!

Panic was rising again in his voice as he hoarsely whispered — "Where are you?"

And instantly:

"A thousand kilometers off your starboard fo'c'sle, mate, and closing fast. Look out toward Gemini, and in about thirty seconds you'll see my exhaust as I try to bring this thing in without killing both of us."

"This thing? What *is* it?"

"Spaceship. Hold on."

He got himself turned in time to see the burn commence. He knew when it shut off exactly how long the burn had been; he had seen it enough times. It was three and five-eighths seconds, the exact burn time for the first stage of the message rockets he had launched every day for almost a year.

"Ooh! Quite a few gees packed into these things," she said.

"But how...?"

"Hold on a few minutes longer." He did as he was asked.

"Damn. Well, it can't be helped, but I'm going to go by you at about fifty kilometers per hour, and half a kilometer away. You'll have to jump for it, but I can throw you a line. You still have that rocket to push against?"

"Yes, and I have quite a bit of fuel in my backpack. I can get to you. That's pretty good shooting over that distance."

"Thanks. I didn't have time for anything fancy, but I..."

"Now you hush. I'm going to have to see this to believe it. Don't spoil it for me."

And slowly, closing on him at a stately fifty kilometers per, was... a thing... that she had off-handedly called a spaceship.

It was all rough-welded metal and ungainly struts and excess mass, but it flew. The heart of it was a series of racks for holding the message rocket first stages in clusters of ten. But dozens of fourth and fifth stages stuck out at odd angles, all connected by wire to Treemonisha's old familiar lounging chair. All the padding and upholstery had frozen and been

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carelessly picked off. And in the chair was Treemonisha.

"Better be ready in about fifty seconds."

"How did you do it? How long did it take you?"

"I just asked myself: 'What would Rock Rogers have done?' and started whipping this into shape."

"You don't fool me for an instant. You never cared for Rock. What would Maryjane Peters, superscientist, have done?"

He could hear the pleased note in her voice, though she tried not to show it.

"Well, maybe you're right. I worked on it for three days, and then I had to go whether it was ready or not, because it was going to take me two days to reach you. I worked on it all the way over here, and I expect to nurse it all the way back. But I intend to *get* back, Jordan, and I'll need all the help I can get from my crew."

"You'll have it."

"Get ready. Jump!"

He jumped, and she threw the line out, and he snagged it, and they slowly spun around each other, and his arms felt like they would be wrenched off, but he held on.

She reeled him in, and he climbed into the awkward cage she had constructed. She bustled around, throwing away expended rocket casings, ridding the ship of all excess mass, hooking him into the big oxygen bottle she had fetched.

"Brace yourself. You're going to have bruises all over your backside when I start up."

The acceleration was brutal, especially since he wasn't cushioned for it. But it lasted only three and five-eighths seconds.

"Well, I've lived through three of these big burns now. One more to go, and we're home free." She busied herself with checking their course, satisfied herself, then sat back in the chair.

They sat awkwardly side by side for a long twenty seconds.

"It's...it's funny to be actually sitting here by you," he ventured.

"I feel the same way." Her voice was subdued, and she found it hard to glance over at him. Hesitantly, her hand reached out and took his. It shocked him to his core, and he almost didn't know what to do. But something took over for him when he finally appreciated through all the conditioned reflexes that it was *all right,* he could touch her. It seemed incredible to him that the spacesuits didn't count for anything; it was enough that they could touch. He convulsively swept her into his arms and crushed her to him. She pounded his back, laughing raggedly. He could barely feel it through the suit, but it was wonderful!

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"It's like making love through an inflated tire," she gasped when she calmed down enough to talk.

"And we're the only two people in the universe who can say that and still say it's great because, before, we were making love by postcard." They had another long hysterical laugh over that.

"How bad is it at your place?" he finally asked.

"Not bad at all. Everything we need is humming. I can give you a bath..."

"A bath!" It sounded like the delights of heaven. "I wish you could smell me. No, I'm glad you can't."

"I wish I could. I'm going to run the tub full of hot, hot water, and then I'm going to undress you and lower you into it, and I'm going to scrub all those things I've been staring at for a year and take my time with it, and then —"

"Hey, we don't need stories anymore, do we? Now we can do it."

"We need them for another two days. More than ever now, because I can't reach the place that's begging for attention. But you didn't let me finish. After I get in the tub with you and let you wash me, and before we head hand in hand for my bedroom, I'm going to get Rock Rogers and Maryjane Peters and The Black Widow and Marc Antony and Jo-jo and his wild mate and hold their heads under the water until they *drown.*"

"No you don't. *I* claim the right to drown Rock Rogers."

COLLECTORS ITEMS

- **VENTURE Science Fiction - November 1969 issue. Only a few copies left. Features the complete short novel "Plague Ship" by Harry Harrison, plus one of James Tiptree's first stories, "The Snows Are Melted, The Snows Are Gone." $1.00**
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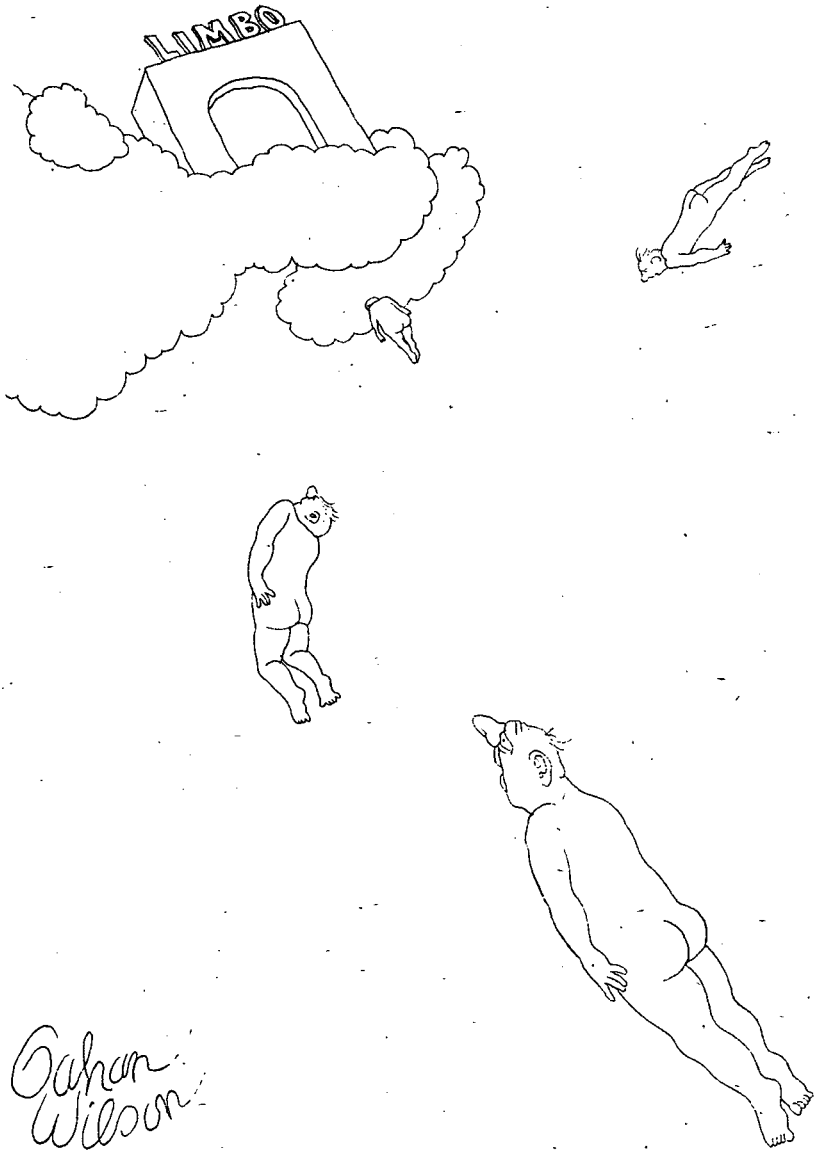

"First, retirement — and now, this!"

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Our expert on comics here provides the inside story on funny-paper fantasy and sf. Did you know that Flash Gordon was a Yalie? This article is from ***The Adventurous Decade: Comic Strips of the Thirties,*** *soon to be published by Arlington House.*

That Buck Rogers Stuff

by RON GOULART

By coincidence *Buck Rogers* and *Tarzan* made their funny paper debuts on the same day, January 7, 1929. Here was authentic fantasy and science fiction being adapted to a new medium, authentic in that both these heroes were born in the pulp magazines. The pulps were the principal source of non-British, non-high-class scientific romances up until the end of World War II. Each of the new strips grabbed a large following, with Buck's impact being so strong that even today science fiction is sometimes referred to as "that Buck Rogers stuff." The Tarzan strip was handsomely drawn by Hal Foster. *Buck Rogers*, on the other hand, resembled something scrawled on an outhouse wall. That didn't matter. Buck was an idea whose time had come. He inspired multitudes of small boys, among them future scientists and science fiction writers, and set syndicate editors to thinking. What the writers and the scientists eventually wrought is beyond our scope, but the wave of space rovers and zap gunners who flourished in the Thirties we'll get to after a short job with Buck Rogers himself.

"When I began my long sleep, man had just begun his real conquest of the air in a sudden series of transoceanic flights in airplanes driven by internal combustion motors. He had barely begun to speculate on the possibilities of harnessing subatomic forces...The United States of America was the most powerful nation in the world...I awoke to find the America I knew a total wreck." Thus spoke Anthony Rogers when he woke up in the pages of the August, 1928, issue of *Amazing Stories* after a 500 year nap. He repeated his Van Winkle act a few months later, this time in a new comic strip entitled *Buck*

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Rogers. John F. Dille, syndicator of the country's first real SF strip, had noticed Philip F. Nowlan's novelet in the Gernsback pulp and asked him to convert his story into a comic strip. Dille decided Nowlan's future-shocked hero needed, however, a snappier first name. He borrowed one from the popular screen cowboy Buck Jones. Rogers overslept in the strip, by the way. In the pulpwood version he came to in 2419; in the funnies he didn't awaken until 2430. Either way, he was in the 25th Century for good. Buck Roger's America, in those early years while Nowlan was still getting used to tomorrow, was a strange place. Stranger than usual. There were flying girl soldiers who toted rocket guns and wore jumping belts; there were television and even electro-hypnotic machines. Yet when Buck wants to look for the missing Wilma, his other new friends help him into the cockpit of a 1920s biplane. Perhaps the airplanes were due to artist Richard Calkins (who persisted in signing himself Lt. Dick Calkins, U.S. Air Corps Reserve), since he was the chief artist on the *Skyroads* strip as well. In addition to contemporary airplanes, *Buck Rogers* contained quite a lot of Roaring Twenties racism. The wrecked United States was now ruled by the Mongol Reds, the 25th Century version of the Yellow Peril, "cruel, greedy and unbelievably ruthless." The underground organization Buck joins is fighting against them. Next to exterminating Caucasians, the Mongols' favorite sport was breeding with them. ("She is a perfect specimen! The Emperor will reward us highly.") The resulting halfbreeds were scorned by Buck's organization pals. The Mongols went in for vivisection, too.

The potency of the idea of looking at the future was such, in those months while America was heading inexorably for the Crash which very nearly wrecked the country 500 years ahead of Nowlan's predicted date, that *Buck Rogers* very quickly became a popular strip. This in spite of wretched dialogue and artwork which set the teeth on edge. "What, specifically, did Buck Rogers have to offer?" asked Ray Bradbury, the nation's oldest little boy, in his introduction to *The Collected Works of Buck Rogers*. "Well, to start out with mere trifles...rocket guns that shoot explosive bullets; people who flew through the air...disintegrators which destroyed, down to the meanest atom, anything they touched; radar-equipped robot armies; television-controlled rockets and rocket bombs....In 1929 our thinking was so primitive we could scarcely imagine the years before a machine

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capable of footprinting moon dust would be invented. And even that prediction was snorted at, declared impossible by 99 per cent of the people....I am inclined to believe it was not so much how the episodes were drawn but what was *happening* in them that made the strip such a success." Perhaps it's as simple as that. *Buck Rogers* made it easy for readers to dream impossible, so they seemed then, dreams.

Dick Calkins had originally intended to be a civil engineer. He might have been a good one. As a cartoonist he never rose beyond, even after years of practice, amateur status. Anything passable in the Rogers dailies and Sundays was the work of his assistants and ghosts. He usually hired them young, operating on the sound theory that you don't have to pay kids as much as you pay grown-ups. His first pair of boy helpers were Zack Mosley and Russell Keaton, who labored on both *Buck Rogers* and *Skyroads*. The Sunday Rogers page, initiated some months after the daily, featured Wilma Deering, Buck's girlfriend, and her teen-age brother Buddy. Like the daily, it was narrated in the first person, in this case by Buddy. "I, Buddy Deering, had joined the Boy Air Scouts division while my sister Wilma and Buck Rogers were in Mongolia," begins the premiere Sunday page. Beyond signing his name to the page each Sunday, Calkins had nothing to do with it. The drawing was by Russell Keaton. In the middle Thirties, Keaton — we'll talk about him in Chapter 6 — became the artist on *Skyroads,* and the *Buck Rogers* Sunday was taken on by Rick Yager, another schoolboy apprentice.

Nowlan and Calkins discovered Mars in 1930. In the daily continuity the Martians appear in the sky over Earth in strange spherical craft. The dominant people on the red planet are the tiger men, a semi-Oriental-appearing bunch who believe the white folks on their home planet are "an insignificant race." After a couple weeks of hovering, the Martian tiger men landed, "marched out of their great sphere, and for the first time beings from another planet set foot on Earth. Little did we realize the turmoil they were to cause..." Meanwhile in the Sunday page, where a separate story was unfolding, Buddy was wafted up to Mars in another of the spheres. "Like a stabbing flame the space ship leaped for the sky and shot towards Mars — and in it I began my first interplanetary journey. Fifty days later we drifted down on Mars, over the country of the tiger men, and before my eyes unfolded a scene such as no Earth man had

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ever beheld — strange people and amazing cities. Curiously the foliage was RED and the water was a queer GREEN!" How fresh all this must have sounded to the average newspaper reader of the 1930s. Phil Nowlan had several decades of pulp predecessors to draw on, and he'd barely gone beyond H.G. Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Right here on Earth, Buck Rogers had an impressive side career as a merchandising property. The *Buck Rogers* radio show first went on the air in 1932, promising listeners futuristic adventures in a time when "Earthmen, no longer tied to the surface of their relatively tiny world by the bonds of gravity, shall seek their destiny in the CONQUEST OF AN ENTIRE UNIVERSE!" Several actors, including Matt Crowly and John Larkin, portrayed Buck during the show's run. Venerable Edgar Stehli was Buck's chuckling mentor Dr. Huer. The Sunday pages were reprinted in comic books, including the forerunner of most reprint comic books, *Famous Funnies,* and the dailies were transformed into Big Little Books. There were Buck Rogers toys. A whole arsenal of assorted zap guns, plus watches, bikes and wagons. Both the radio show and the strip offered a club, the Solar Scouts, for kids to join. Volunteers received, "enlistment papers, including the SECRET SIGN, the SECRET PASSWORD, the SECRET SIGNAL and SPECIAL ORDER No. 1," as well as information on how to earn medals and such ranks as Chief Explorer, Space Ship Commander and member of the Supreme Inner Circle. While boys could rise in the organization, the only rank open to girls was Interplanetary Nurse.

Phil Nowlan died in 1940; Dick Calkins quit the strip a few years later. Rick Yager, allowed to sign his work at long last, carried on. Murphy Anderson, surely one of the stodgiest and most unimaginative of SF artists, had a couple of cracks at drawing Buck. Then in the spring of 1959 George Tuska came along to look after Buck Rogers during his final years. The writing passed from hand to hand, with science fiction writers such as Fritz Leiber doing sequences. The strip held on until 1967, living to see a good many of its gadgets and predictions become realities.

The Hearst organization, always quick to spot a trend, turned to science fiction strips in the early Thirties. Their initial attempt at a Buck Rogers type strip was tried out in the sticks first. *Brick Bradford* was introduced in 1933 by the Central Press Association, Hearst's small-town syndicate. Although Brick did appear in a few of the larger Hearst newspapers, it

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was in the many lesser papers that he made his early impact. The hick syndicate was offering a Frank Merriwell strip at the same time, and there is something of that strong-jawed, clean-living left over from an earlier era in the red-headed Brick. It took Brick quite a few years to get out into space; in his early adventures he was "a young American castaway in a lost world." He spent a good deal of time in the Land of the Lost, a place rich in monsters, wizards, pirates and damsels in distress. The sort of location A. Merritt had been offering guided tours of in the pages of the Munsey pulps for the past decade and more. As the 1930s wore on, Brick Bradford visited other out-of-the-way places — the Middle of the Earth, the reign of Queen Anne and the year 6937. The time traveling he did after he gained access to a marvelous invention called the Time Top. Designed by Professor Horatio Southern, the Time Top was intended to help him "unravel the secrets of the past and probe the mysteries of the future." Southern and his mysterious machine originally had a strip of their own. Titled *The Time Top,* it started as a companion to the *Brick Bradford* Sunday page in 1935. I have the idea that the bulky machine must have, at some point, fallen down from upstairs and landed in Brick's panels. At any rate, by the late 1930s he and Professor Southern and lovely April Southern were spinning their way through time and space.

The Brick Bradford adventures were drawn by Clarence Gray, in a pulpy drybrush style. A redhead like his hero, Gray had been a staff artist on the *Toledo News Bee.* William Ritt took care of the writing. He'd put in time on several newspapers and kept his job as editor and columnist on a Cleveland newspaper throughout most of the years he scripted *Brick Bradford.* A student of history and mythology, and a borrower from the works of Merritt and Burroughs, Ritt tried to be a little slangy in his dialogue, having everybody address each other as "kid" during one such spell. In his descriptive passages he let his flowery side show through — "The acceleration of the Time Top is so rapid that soon day and night blend into a gray-blue continuous twilight! The sun and moon are not but bands of bold across the sky. Time races on! Centuries are but hours! Generations of the outside world but a few minutes to those within the whirling top! Slowly a magnificent city rises on the nearby plain. It stands for a little while in ghostly beauty in the twilight of compressed time — and then vanishes into the dust from which it

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arose!" When Gray died in the early 1950s, Paul Norris picked up the art chores. As of this writing, the strip is still appearing, although once again mostly in small-town newspapers.

A science fiction strip which matched *Buck Rogers* in awfulness of writing and drawing, though not in popularity, was *Jack Swift*. An early 1930s offering of the Ledger Syndicate, the strip's awful continuity was by Cliff Farrell and its awful art by Hal Colson. Jack, possibly a poor relation of Tom Swift, was a brilliant young inventor. His major invention was a rocket ship which was "A combined airship, stream-lined bus, vessel, and submarine." The first thing Jack and his comrades did once the ship was completed was to head for the Antartic to substantiate Jack's theory that "the Antartic was once part of the ancient land of Mu." A great many perils befell them, not the least of which was capture by giant penguins.

A much better looking SF feature, though no smarter in the script department, was *Flash Gordon*. It began, as a Sunday page, on January 7, 1934. "World Comes To End," announced a newspaper headline in the first panel. "Strange New Planet Rushing Toward Earth — Only Miracle Can Save Us, Says Science." In movie fashion we are then shown shots of the African jungles "as howling blacks await their doom," the Arabian desert where "the Arab...faces Mecca and prays for salvation," and Times Square, where "a seething mass of humanity watches a bulletin board describing the flight of the comet." All is not lost, however, since Dr. Hans Zarkov is working day and night to perfect "a device with which he hopes to save the world." As fate would have it, an Eastbound airliner is struck by a comet while passing over Zarkov's home. Among those parachuting from the ill-fated craft are "Flash Gordon, Yale graduate and world-reknowned polo player, and Dale Arden, a passenger." What with one thing and another, Flash and Dale end up in Zarkov's backyard. Zarkov happens to have a rocket ship there, and he forces the pair to accompany him on a comet-busting mission. This results, eventually, in their landing on the planet Mongo. You wouldn't think people would fight over credit for this initial sequence, which is little more than a clumsy blending of Philip Wylie's *When Worlds Collide*, published in book form the year before, with a few assorted Edgar Rice Burroughs novels. Yet both Joe Connolly, King Features president in the 30s, and Alex Raymond later claimed they'd written it. According to Lee Falk, a

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long-time friend of Raymond's, Flash's adventures were written from the start by unheralded Don Moore.

Alexander Gillespie Raymond was in his early twenties when he drew his first *Flash Gordon* pages. Although he'd never signed a strip before, Raymond's work had been appearing in newspapers for the past couple years. His last job before taking off for Mongo was ghosting Lyman Young's *Tim Tyler's Luck*, and that followed periods of assisting on *Blondie* and *Tillie the Toiler*. It was Russ Westover, creator of the latter strip, who got young Raymond a $20-a-week job in the King Features bullpen. The Raymonds and the Westovers had once been neighbors in New Rochelle, New York, and when Raymond made up his mind to try for an art career, he looked up the older cartoonist. Before sending him on to King, Westover employed the young man as an assistant. What he paid him was probably even less than $20. Known as a cautious man in financial matters, Westover at least once had an assistant who worked for no salary at all. He had been able to persuade the youth that the experience of working with a real pro was worth more than money. How early Alex Raymond wanted to be an artist is difficult to determine from biographical accounts. He seems to have varied his life story with each interview. "I had no idea that I would ever be an artist," Raymond told one questioner. "When I was eighteen years old I went to work in a Wall Street brokerage office, and was a sad onlooker at the crash of 1929. After losing my job there, I tried to solicit renewals for mortgages, but this business was so bad that I soon quit and went to work for Russ Westover." Raymond told another interviewer he'd wanted to be an artist from childhood on. "I should say my father's encouragement was the greatest factor in making art my career. As a matter of fact, he had one wall on his office in the Woolworth Building covered with my drawings." In this version his father's death causes Raymond to abandon his drawing ambitions and enter Wall Street as an order clerk. However long Raymond had been drawing, his early *Flash Gordon* pages were not much to look at. The drawing was stiff, his inking uncertain, and correct perspective often eluded him. After a year or so, his compositions grew much better, and he mastered the drybrush technique of rendering, an approach then much in favor among pulp illustrators and some slick men.

The appearance of *Flash Gordon* improved greatly. Not only was Alex Raymond drawing better,

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he was swiping from better artists. Among his favorites were now Matt Clark and John LaGatta. From Clark's slick illustrations he borrowed a good deal, including the prototype for the new improved version of his other hero, Jungle Jim. LaGatta he used for pretty girls. Another reason for the great leap forward in the drawing of Flash was the hiring of the late Austin Briggs as an assistant. Briggs had been working, in such magazines as *Blue Book*, with a heroic style similar to the one Raymond adopted in the middle 30s. When I interviewed Briggs a few years ago, he was unclear about when he'd gone to work with Raymond and how exactly he got the job. "I think I met him at a cocktail party," he told me. And Briggs thought he'd been associated with the Flash page as early as late 1934 or early 1935. If this is so, a good many of the advances made from that point on are due as much to him as to Raymond.

While the pictures grew better and better, and the half page stretched to almost a full page, the stories went right on being clunky. Although Mongo, with its castles and fluttering banners and deep forests, had a Ruritanian feel, the concerns of the 1930s also cropped up. Wars, invasions, dictators. Ming, the merciless emperor of much of the planet, was yet another embodiment of the Yellow Peril. His anti-white bias and his purple pronouncements made him a sort of galactic Fu Manchu. Don Moore's copy was plummy stuff and his dialogue ideally suited to the far planets, since nobody on Earth ever talked this way —

MING: I see, Barin, that you've defied my orders that no man may let his hair grow!
BARIN: Just because you're bald, is no good reason why we Arborians should go hairless!

AURA: Father, why this sudden desire to see my son? Certainly, your interest is not sentimental!
MING: Sentiment? Bah! I intend to take your son away from all parental care and place him under the supervision of my generals, so that, some day, he may succeed me on the throne of Mongo!
AURA: No...no! Never! Ugh! You're positively inhuman!

It's probable most of Flash's followers didn't pay much attention to what was lettered, in meticulous architectural fashion by Raymond's uncle, under the picture. It was the pictures themselves — vast tableaux of lovely women and heroic men in fantasy palaces, scenes of lush monster-ridden jungles, and all that larger-than-life bravura action,

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all those adolescent dreams of romance and adventure so patiently given life — which seduced the readers. While not as widely publicized as Milton Caniff, Chester Gould and some of the other top-grossing comic strip artists, Raymond was one of the most influential. Himself an admirer of Hal Foster, Raymond inspired another whole generation of comic book and comic strip men. Raymond had made some attempts to move up into magazine illustration, but little came of it. He resigned himself to being a comic strip artist and said, in characteristic fashion, "I decided honestly that comic-art work is an art form in itself, it reflects the life and times more accurately and actually is more artistic than magazine illustration."

Alex Raymond joined the Marines in 1944. One of his less gifted brothers carried on his *Jungle Jim* and Austin Briggs assumed full responsibility for *Flash Gordon*. Briggs had already soloed on an occasional Sunday and had done all the artwork on the daily Flash strip which got going in May of 1940. The writing on the everyday version matched the Sunday. The opening day shows Flash and Dale rocketing through the skies above Mongo. We cut inside the ship to hear Flash say, "Alone at last!" To which Dale replies, "I feel so safe with you, dear!" Briggs would occasionally initial his weekday work, but he never signed the Sunday page. "I was ashamed of it," he later admitted. Unlike Alex Raymond, Briggs couldn't drop his ambition to become a magazine illustrator. He stuck with Flash for four years on his own; then when King offered him another contract, he turned it down. After leaving the syndicate he walked around Manhattan, feeling sick to his stomach and afraid he'd made the wrong decision. But he hadn't.

Mac Raboy, up from the comic books, followed Briggs on the Sunday page. When the daily was revived in 1951, Dan Barry, yet another comic book alum, was given the drawing job. Don Moore kept on filling the Sunday page with his inimitable prose, finally being allowed a credit. Several people, among them Harry Harrison, wrote the daily adventures. On Raboy's death in 1967, Barry, and his large crew of ghosts, was put in charge of the whole thing. Like many who were bright young men in the 1930s, Flash Gordon is somewhat diminished today. It's likely that the Raymond-Briggs pages, being reprinted in books, magazines and newspapers around the world, have a much larger readership than the current *Flash Gordon* feature.

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The least circulated science fantasy strip of the Thirties was *Rod Rian of the Sky Police.* This short-lived Sunday page was done in the mid-30s by Paul H. Jepsen as part of an 8-page ready-print tabloid comic section produced by the George Matthew Adams Service. The section, also featuring the work of Jack Warren and Al Carreño, ran in such papers as the Metuchen, New Jersey, *Review and Raritan Township Sun,* which accounts for the fact that so few people ever saw any of its pages. The artist, after several weeks, changed the spelling of his last name to Jepson. His wife was interested in numerology at the time. Jepsen, who has long-since returned to the original spelling, was in his twenties when he undertook the *Rod Rian* page. Recently married and living in Greenwich Village, he was working full time for an outfit called United Theater Advertisers. UTA turned out mat service movie ads, and among Jepsen's fellow workers were Stephen Longstreet and Carreño. Through Carreño, who'd come to New York from Mexico a few years earlier, Jepsen heard the Adams syndicate was looking for artists. He had a moderate interest in science fiction, and so he suggested a *Flash Gordon* sort of page. Adams bought his idea, gave him $25 a week to write and draw it. This is the only newspaper strip Jepsen ever did. When it folded he went into illustration and commercial art.

Like *Flash Gordon* and *Tarzan, Rod Rian* avoided balloons. Jepsen was far from being a rival to Raymond or Foster, but he had a distinctive drybrush style. In the first page Rod is assigned to catch some space pirates who've "cost the Earth seven transport ships, many men and billions of earthons in Tellurium." The next week he is captured by beastlike aliens and taken to the strange planet of Mephistos. The first Sunday page, by the way, takes place in 2500 A.D. and the second in 2700. This time jump was apparently due to Jepsen's casual approach to the page rather than some sort of time machine. Fortunately for the sake of Rod's assignment, the Mephisians also turn out to be the space pirates he's after. Every thing would no doubt have come to a happy conclusion if the tabloid section had survived.

In 1939, that runaway planet started heading straight for Earth again, a smash-up looked inevitable. "The Earth will be shattered into fragments by the collision...NO LIVING THING WILL SURVIVE." This time it wasn't somebody ripping off Philip Wylie, though. The John F. Dille syndicate, surely hoping for another

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Buck Rogers, turned Wylie's *When Worlds Collide,* written in collaboration with Edwin Balmer, into a daily and Sunday comic feature. The book must have seemed a likely property. Orson Welles had scared the more nervous segment of the population only the year before with his Mercury Theatre broadcast of *The War of the Worlds,* and this was even more unsettling than a Martian invasion. It's usually been true that a public worried about large disasters approaching will rush to be entertained by a fiction about an even larger disaster. Somehow, though, the strip never caught on.

Rather than name it after the book, Dillie christened the feature *Speed Spaulding.* Speed, who doesn't appear in the novel or its sequel, is the hero of this saga of the waning days of the planet. Professor Bronson, the first man to become aware of the two spheres hurtling toward Earth (modestly dubbed Bronson Alpha and Bronson Beta), was transferred from the novel to the comic strip, not without having his name changed to Bronton. The writing on *Speed Spaulding* was credited to Balmer and Wylie, which is highly unlikely. The drawing, done in a creditable variation of the Caniff-Sickles style, was by Marvin Bradley. Not too lucky with Speed, Bradley fared better when he later teamed up to do *Rex Morgan, MD.* No comic strip ever came to a more impressive conclusion than did *Speed Spaulding.* Speed and his selected friends clamber aboard their space ship hours before Alpha is due to strike Earth. They blast off, using atomic engines, and head out into space. In the final panel of the final strip the world blows up.

BOOKS RECEIVED

The News Mars, by William Hartmann and Odell Raper, published by National Aeronautics and Space Administration, available from: Supt. of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, Stock No. 3300-00577, $8.75. A new look at Mars in the light of the 11-month scrutiny of the red planet by Mariner 9. Text by William K. Hartmann of the Planetary Science Institute and Odell Raper of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Many photos, maps, paintings (some by Chesley Bonestell and Don Davis) some in color.

The regular books column will be resumed next month.

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The compelling conclusion to Robert Silverberg's new novel, in which Lew Nichols, once a political prognosticator, confronts the awesome and terrifying power to truly see the future.

The Stochastic Man

3rd of 3 Parts

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

Synopsis - Parts 1 and 2

Lew Nichols is nearly 35 years old as the twentieth century enters its final months. He has been, until recently, a key administrative assistant to Paul Quinn, the dynamic young mayor of New York City. He has been, until recently, the husband of Sundara Shastri, a strikingly beautiful woman of East Indian ancestry. He has been, until recently, a disciple of Martin Carvajal, an odd, parched little man who is capable of seeing the future. But now, as he looks back over the past few years during the closing days of the year 2000, Nichols finds himself alone; Quinn is his enemy, his marriage has come apart, Carvajal is dead.

Before becoming involved in politics Nichols had been in the business of stochastic prediction — essentially, high-powered guesswork. An innate knack for considering probabilities and extracting likely patterns had made him a successful short-range prophet, much consulted by businessmen and politicians. In 1995, his friend Haig Mardikian, a lawyer with political connections, had introduced Nichols to Paul Quinn, then an obscure state legislator but already seen by a few close friends as a potential Presidential candidate. Reluctantly at first, Nichols lets himself be drawn into the Quinn camp. With Nichols' almost infallible suggestions guiding campaign strategy, Quinn sweeps easily to victory in the 1997 election for Mayor of New York — first stop on his way to the White House. Nichols accepts an appointment on Mayor Quinn's staff.

The Presidency is still a distant dream, for the incumbent President Mortonson is unlikely to be defeated in the 2000 election and Nichols does not want his man prematurely exposed in a losing cause. The plan, therefore — proposed by Nichols and seconded by Quinn's other two main advisers, Deputy Mayor Haig Mardikian and City Finance Administrator Bob Lombroso — is to bring Quinn gradually into the center of national political life so that he can make a plausible try for the nomination in 2004. Drawing on all his stochastic skills, Nichols attempts to design a program of action that will catapult Quinn to power.

One day in March of 1999 Nichols

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meets a curious person at the office of Bob Lombroso. He is Martin Carvajal, a small, faded-looking man of about sixty, who has made millions speculating on Wall Street and was one of the most generous contributors to Quinn's campaign fund the year before. Carvajal too thinks Quinn is destined to become President, and wants to offer aid — not merely financial aid but suggestions of strategy. Nichols and Lombroso listen politely to him, for they have no wish to offend the millionaire, but Nichols in particular takes a patronizing attitude, regarding Carvajal as a well-meaning but ignorant political amateur seeking to meddle in things he does not understand. When he leaves Lombroso's office, Carvajal hands Nichols a cryptic memorandum bearing three predictions — none of them comprehensible to Nichols. He puts the memo away and dismisses Carvajal from his mind.

He is preoccupied, now, with designing the role Quinn is to play in the 2000 national election campaign; the idea is for him to make a game but unsuccessful bid for the vice-presidential nomination, thereby setting the stage for his Presidential bid four years later. Nichols is also troubled by events at home, for his wife Sundara has become affiliated with the Transit Creed, a new religion out of California that advocates irrational, unpredictable behavior, and the strains caused by Sundara's new way of life are pulling their marriage apart. Then, in May of 1999, State Controller Gilmartin is indicted in a bribery scandal — which startles Nichols, for one of Carvajal's three predictions had involved Gilmartin. Nichols investigates Carvajal's background, discovers that he has had an almost infallible record of success in the stock market, and — acting on a hunch — persuades Mayor Quinn to take a public stand on a measure controlling oil spills, something else Carvajal had suggested. Quinn has a tough oil-control law put through the City Council just a few days before several severe spills touch off a national outcry; Quinn benefits politically from the timing. Nichols now is convinced that Carvajal has some method for predicting the future that goes far beyond Nichols' own stochastic system of guesswork.

Then Carvajal's third prediction comes true: Governor Leydecker of California, the most powerful figure in the New Democratic Party, dies unexpectedly. Nichols is stunned and humbled by this unanswerable proof of Carvajal's gift.

He feels worthless and confused. He needs guidance.

He goes to Carvajal.

Carvajal lives in a dismal, decaying slum section of Brooklyn. He is casual and offhanded in his conversation with Nichols, who feels himself being manipulated in ways he barely understands. Carvajal admits that he is able to perceive the future — to *see* — as though it were a film playing in his mind; he has had the gift all his life, but, except for piling up his stock-market fortune, he has made no particular use of it, choosing to live quietly, alone in the apartment where he grew up. Nichols observes an odd kind of paralysis of the will about the older man. Carvajal tells him, "My life is without surprises, and it is without decisions, and it is without voliton. I do what I know I must do." Carvajal, that is, merely follows the script of the film within his mind, unquestioningly

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obeying the visions he sees. Carvajal believes it is impossible to alter the perceived future: if he *sees* an event taking place in times to come, that event must take place, no matter how he tries to use his special knowledge to keep it from happening.

This fatalism seems repellent and unconvincing to Nichols; but the more contact he has with Carvajal, the more he comes to believe that changing the future is impossible. Carvajal becomes a gurufigure for him, gradually indoctrinating Nichols in an understanding of how true precognition functions. Nichols realizes that Carvajal has even *seen* the moment of his own death, which is less than seventeen months away.

Still obsessed with the idea of making Paul Quinn President, Nichols resolves to get from Carvajal whatever information he may have that may be useful in the campaign. They see each other frequently; Nichols falls more deeply under the spell of the older man; eventually Carvajal reveals that his power of second sight can be transmitted, that he can awaken it in anyone, that eventually he will teach Nichols how to *see*. The idea thrills and frightens him. Nichols meets with Carvajal on the promenade along the Hudson River on a dark, storm-threatened day and begs him to impart the power to him. Carvajal warns that the power can be a curse. Nichols doesn't care.

"Very well," Carvajal says. "Give yourself to me, Lew, on a no-question-asked basis."

"Done," Nichols says.

The lightning comes. The skies open and a crazy drenching downpour batters them with implausible fury.

26.

A day and a half later. "The worst of it," Carvajal said, "is *seeing* your own death. That's the moment when the life goes out of you, not when you actually die, but when you have to *see* it."

"Is that the curse you were talking about?"

"Yes. That's the curse. That's what killed me, Lew, long before my proper time. I was almost thirty years old, the first time I *saw* it. I've *seen* it many times since. I know the date, the hour, the place, the circumstances. I've lived through it, again and again, the beginning, the middle, the end, the darkness, the silence. And once I *saw* it life became nothing more than a meaningless puppet show for me."

"What was the worst part?" I asked. "Knowing when, knowing how?"

"Knowing that," he said.

"That you would die at all?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. I mean, it must be disturbing, yes, to watch yourself die, to see your own finish as if on a newsreel, but there can't be any fundamental element of surprise in it, can there? I mean, death is inevitable and we all know it from the time we're little children."

"Do we?"

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"Of course we do."

"Do you think you'll die, Lew?"

I blinked a couple of times. "Naturally."

"Are you absolutely convinced of that?"

"I don't get you. Are you implying I have delusions of immortality?"

Carvajal smiled serenely. "Everybody does, Lew. When you're a boy your pet goldfish dies, or your dog, and you say, Well, goldfish don't live long, dogs don't live long, and that's how you slough off your first experience of death. It doesn't apply to you. The boy next door falls off his bicycle and fractures his skull. Well, you say, accidents happen, but they don't *prove* anything, some people are more careless than others, and I'm one of the careful ones. Your grandmother dies. She was old and sick for years, you say, she let hereself get too heavy, she grew up in a generation when preventive medicine was still primitive, she didn't know how to take care of her body. It won't happen to me, you say. It won't happen to me."

"My parents are dead. My sister died. I had a turtle that died. Death isn't something remote and unreal in my life. No, I believe in death. I know I'm going to die."

"You don't. Not really."

"How can you say that?"

"I know how people are. I know how I used to be, before I *saw* myself die, and what I became afterward. Not many have had that experience, have been changed as I've been changed. Perhaps no one else, ever. Listen to me, Lew. Nobody genuinely and fully believes he's going to die, whatever he may think he thinks. You may accept it up here on top, but you don't accept it on the cellular level, down on the level of metabolism and mitosis. Your heart hasn't missed a beat in thirty-odd years and it knows it never will. Your body goes merrily along like a three-shift factory manufacturing corpuscles, lymph, semen, saliva, round the clock; and so far as your body knows, it always will. And your brain, it perceives itself as the center of a great drama whose star is Lew Nichols, the whole universe just a giant collection of props, everything that happens happening around *you*, in relation to *you*, with *you* as the pivot and fulcrum; and if you go to somebody's wedding, the name of that scene isn't *Dick and Judy Get Married;* no, it's *Lew Goes to Somebody's Wedding;* and if a politician gets elected, it isn't *Paul Quinn Becomes President,* it's *Lew Experiences Paul Quinn Becoming President;* and if a star explodes, the headline isn't *Betelgeuse Goes Nova* but *Lew's Universe Loses a Star,* and so on, the same for everyone, everyone

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the hero of the great drama of existence, Dick and Judy each in staring roles in their own heads, Paul Quinn, maybe even Betelgeuse; and each of you knows that if you were to die the whole universe would have to wink out like a switched-off light, and that isn't possible; so therefore you aren't going to die. You know you're the one exception. Holding the whole business together by your continued existence. All those others, Lew, you realize *they're* going to die, sure, they're the bit parts, the spear carriers, the script calls for them all to vanish along the way, but not you, oh, no, not you! Isn't that how it truly is, Lew, down in the basement of your soul, down in those mysterious levels you visit only now and then?"

I had to grin. "Maybe it is, after all. But—"

"It is. It's the same way for everyone. It was for me. Well, people *do* die, Lew. Some die at twenty and some die at a hundred and twenty, and it's *always* a surprise. They stand there seeing the big blackness opening up for them, and as they go into the hole, they say, My God, I was wrong after all, it's really going to happen to me, even to *me!* What a shock that is, what a terrific blow to the ego, to discover that you aren't the unique exception you thought you were. But it's comforting, right up until that moment arrives, to cling to the idea that maybe you'll sneak through, maybe you'll somehow be exempt. Everybody has that scrap of comfort to live by, Lew. Everyone except me."

"You found *seeing* it as bad as that?"

"It demolished me. It stripped me of that one big illusion, Lew, that secret hope of immortality, that keeps us going. Of course, I had to keep going, forty years or so more, because I could *see* that it wouldn't happen until I was an old man. But the knowledge put a wall around my life, a boundary, an unbeakable seal. I wasn't much more than a boy, and I had already had the real summing up, the period at the end of the sentence. I couldn't count on enjoying all of eternity, the way others think they do. I had only my forty-odd years left to go. Knowing that about yourself constricts your life, Lew. It limits your options."

"It isn't easy for me to understand why it should have that effect."

"Eventually you'll understand."

"Maybe it won't be that way for me, when I come to know."

"Ah!" Carvajal cried. "We all think we'll be the exception!"

27.

He told me, the next time we

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met, how his death would come to pass. He had less than a year to live, he said. It was going to happen in the spring of 2000, somewhere between the 10th of April and the 25th of May; although he claimed to know the exact date even down to the time of day, he was unwilling to be any more specific about it than that.

"Why withhold it from me?" I asked.

"Because I don't care to be burdened with your private tensions and anticipations," Carvajal told me bluntly. "I don't want you showing up that day knowing it *is* the day, and arriving full of irrelevant emotional confusion."

"Am I going to be there?" I asked, astounded.

"Certainly."

"Will you tell me where it'll happen?"

"At my apartment," he said. "You and I will be discussing something having to do with a problem troubling you then. The doorbell will ring. I'll answer it, and a man will force his way into the house, an armed man with red hair, who—"

"Wait a minute. You once told me that no one had ever bothered you in that neighborhood and no one ever would."

"No one *who lives there*," said Carvajal. "This man will be a stranger. He has been given my address by mistake — he has the wrong apartment — and expects to be picking up a consignment of drugs, something that sniffers use. When I tell him I don't have any drugs, he'll refuse to believe me; he'll think it's some kind of double cross and will start to get violent, waving the gun around, threatening me."

"And what am I doing while all this is going on?"

"Watching it."

"Watching? Just standing there with my arms folded like a spectator?"

"Just watching," Carvajal said. "Like a spectator." There was a sharp edge to his tone. As if he were giving me an order:

You will do nothing throughout this scene. You will remain entirely out of it, off to one side, a mere onlooker.

"I could hit him with a lamp. I could try to grab the gun."

"You won't."

"All right," I said. "What happens?"

"Someone knocks at the door. It's one of my neighbors, who's heard the commotion and is worried about me. The gunman panics. Thinks it's the police, or maybe a rival gang. He fires three times; then he breaks a window and disappears down the fire escape. The bullets strike me in the chest, the arm, and the side of my

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head. I linger for a minute or so. You're not harmed at all."

"And then?"

Carvajal laughed. "And then? And then? How would I know? I've told you: I *see* as though through a periscope. The periscope reaches only as far as that moment, and no farther. Perception ends for me there."

How calm he was about it!

I said, "Is this the thing you *saw* the day you and I had lunch at the Merchants and Shippers Club?"

"Yes."

"You sat there watching yourself get gunned down and then casually asked to look at the menu?"

"The scene was nothing new to me."

"How often have you *seen* it?" I asked.

"No idea. Twenty times, fifty, maybe a hundred. Like a recurring dream."

"A recurring nightmare."

"One gets used to it. It ceases to carry much emotional charge after the first dozen viewings or so."

"It's nothing but a movie to you? An old Cagney flick on the late-night television?"

"Something like that," said Carvajal. "The scene itself becomes trivial, a bore, stale, predictable. It's the implications that linger, that never lose their power over me, while the details themselves have become unimportant."

"You just accept it. You won't try to slam the door in the man's face when the moment comes. You won't let me hide behind the door and club him down. You won't ask the police to put you under special guard that day."

"Naturally not. What good would any of that do?"

"As an experiment —"

He pursed his lips. He looked annoyed at my stubborn return to a theme that was absurd to him. "What I *see* is what will happen. The time for experiments was fifty years ago, and the experiments failed. No, we won't interfere, Lew. We'll play our parts obediently, you and I. You know we will."

28.

Under the new regime I conferred with Carvajal daily, sometimes several times a day, usually by telephone, transmitting to him the latest inside political information — strategies, news developments, conversations with out-of-town leaders, data projections, anything that might seem even peripherally pertinent to the business of getting Paul Quinn into the White House. The reason for filing all this stuff in Carvajal's mind was the periscope effect; he

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couldn't *see* anything that his consciousness would not ultimately somehow perceive, and what he couldn't *see* he couldn't pass along to me. What I was doing, then, was phoning messages to myself out of the future — messages relayed by way of Carvajal. The things I told him today were, of course, worthless for this purpose, since present-me already knew them; but what I would tell him a month from now might prove to be of value to me today; and since the information had to get into the system at some point, I began the input flow here, feeding Carvajal now the data he had *seen* months or even years ago. Over the remaining year of Carvajal's life he would become a unique repository of future political events.

And Carvajal, day by day, flowed data back to me — mainly things having to do with the long-range shaping of Quinn's destinies. These I passed along to Haig Mardikian, usually, though some fell into the domain of George Missakian — media relations — and some, having to do with financial matters, went to Lombroso, and a few I took directly to Quinn himself. My Carvajal-derived memos in a typical week included items like this —

Invite Commun. Devel. Commissioner Spreckels to lunch. Suggest possibil. of judgeship.

Attend wedding, son of Sen. Wilkom of Mass.

Tell Con Ed, confidential, no hope of okay for proposed Flatbush fusion plant.

Gov's brother — name him to Triboro Authority. Defuse nepotism issue in advance with jokes at press conf.

Call in Assembly Spkr. Feinberg for gentle arm-twisting in re NY-Mass-Conn pod-hookup bill.

Position papers: libraries, drugs, interstate population transfer.

Tour Garment District Historic Site with new Israeli consul-general. Include in party: Leibman, Berkowitz, Ms. Weisbard, Rabbi Dubin, also Msgr. O'Neill.

Sometimes I understood why my future self was recommending a given course of action to Quinn, and at other times I was altogether baffled. (Why, say, tell him to veto an innocuous City Council proposal reopening a no-parking zone south of Canal Street? How would that

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help him become President?) Carvajal offered no aid. He was merely passing along tips he was getting from the me of eight or nine months from now. Since he'd be dead before any of these things could manifest their ultimate implications, he had no idea what effect they might produce. He gave everything to me on a bland take-it-or-leave-it basis. Mine not to reason why. Follow the script, Lew, follow the script.

I followed the script.

My vicarious political ambitions were beginning to take on the character of a divine mission: using Carvajal's gift and Quinn's charisma, I would be able to reshape the world into a Better Place of unspecified ideal character. I felt the throbbing conduits of power in my grasp. Whereas before I had seen Quinn's presidency as a goal worth pursuing for its own sake, now I became practically Utopian in my plans for a world guided by the ability to *see.* No longer did I think in terms of manipulation, of redeployment of motivations, of political machination, except in service of the higher end toward which I imagined myself working.

Day after day I streamed my memos toward Quinn and his minions. Mardikian and the mayor assumed the stuff I was handing in was the result of my own projections, the product of my polltakers, my computers, and my sweet canny cerebrum. Since my record of stochastic insight over the years had been consistently excellent, they did as I told them. Unquestioningly. Quinn occasionally laughed and said, "Boy, this one doesn't make much sense to me," but I told him, "It will, it will," and he went along with it. Lombroso, though, must have realized I was getting a lot of these things from Carvajal. But he never said a word about that to me — nor, I believe, to Quinn or Mardikian.

From Carvajal I also got instructions of a more personal kind.

"It's time to get your hair cut," he told me early in September.

"Short, you mean?"

"Off."

"Are you telling me to shave my scalp?"

"That's what I'm telling you."

"No," I said. "If there's one silly fad I detest —"

"Irrelevant. As of this month you began wearing your hair like that. Do it tomorrow, Lew."

"I wouldn't ever have gotten a Pruss," I objected. "It's altogether out of keeping with my —"

"You did," Carvajal said simply. "How can you quarrel with that?"

I *could* quarrel with it, of

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course. But what was the use of arguing? He had *seen* me bald; hence I just go and get a Pruss. No questions asked, the man had told me when I came aboard: just follow the script, boy.

I yielded myself up unto the barber. I came out looking like an oversized Erich von Stroheim, minus monocle and stiff collar.

"How marvelous it looks!" Sundara cried. "How gorgeous!"

She ran her hands tenderly over my stubbly scalp. It was the first time in two or three months that there had been any kind of current flowing between us. She loved the haircut, absolutely adored it. Of course: getting cropped like that was a crazy Transit sort of thing for me to do. To her it was a sign that I might yet shape up.

There were other orders.

"Spend a weekend in Caracas," Carvajal said. "Charter a fishing boat. You'll catch a swordfish."

"Why?"

"Do it," he said implacably.

"Will you explain this, at least?"

"There's no explanation. You have to go to Caracas."

It was absurd. But I went to Caracas. I drank too many margaritas with some lawyers from New York, who didn't know I was Quinn's right hand and put him down rather noisily, going on and on about the good old days when Gottfried kept the rabble in line. Fascinating. I hired a boat and did indeed catch a swordfish, nearly breaking both wrists in the process, and had the damned beast mounted at staggering cost. It began to occur to me that Carvajal and Sundara might be in league to drive me crazy, or maybe to drive me into the arms of the nearest Transit proctor. (Same thing?) More likely Carvajal was merely giving me a crash course in following the script. Accept whatever dictate comes to you out of tomorrow; never ask questions.

I accepted the dictates.

I grew a beard. I bought nippy-dip new clothes. I picked up a sullen cow-breasted sixteen-year-old in Times Square, filled her with rum swizzles in the highest eyrie of the Hyatt Regency, rented a room there for two hours and grimly fornicated with her. I spent three days up at the Columbia Medical Center as a volunteer subject for sonopuncture research and left there with every bone buzzing. I went down to my neighborhood Numbers office and put a thousand bucks on 666 and got wiped out because that day's winner was 667. I complained bitterly about that to Carvajal. "I don't mind doing craziness, but this is expensive craziness. Couldn't you at least have given me the right number?"

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He smiled obliquely and said he *had* given me the right number. I assume I was *supposed* to lose. All part of my training, it seemed. Existential masochism: the Zen approach to gambling. All right. Never ask questions. A week later he had me put a thou on 333, and I hit for a not-so-small fortune. So there were a few compensations.

I wore my funny clothes. I got my scalp scraped regularly. I endured the itching of my beard, and after a while I stopped noticing it. I sent the mayor off lunching and dinnering with a weird assortment of eventually influential politicians. God help me, I followed the script.

Early in October Carvajal said, "Now you file for a divorce."

29.

Divorce, Carvajal said, on a brisk crisp blue-skied Wednesday in October, a day of withered yellow early-falling maple leaves dancing in the sharp westerly wind, now you file for a divorce, now you arrange the termination of your marriage. Wednesday the sixth of October, 1999, just 86 days left to the end of the century, unless of course you were the kind of purist who insisted, with logic if not emotional justice on your side, that the new century would not properly begin until the first of January, 2001. At any rate, 86 days left until the changing of the digit. *As the digit shifts,* Quinn had said in his most famous speech, *let us wipe clean the slate and begin afresh, remembering but not reenacting the errors of the past.* Had marrying Sundara been one of the errors of the past? Now you file for a divorce, Carvajal told me, and he was not so much stating an imperative command as he was reporting impersonally to me on the necessary state of things to come. Thus does the unyielding inescapable future ineluctably devour the present. Why, why, for what end, to what purpose, *por qué, pourquoi, warum?* I still loved her.

Yet the marriage had plainly been ailing all through the summer and euthanasia was a plausible prescription now. Whatever we had had was gone, altogether fallen into ruin; she was lost in the rhythms and rituals of Transit, wholly given over to her sacred absurdities, and I was deep into dreams of visionary powers, and though we shared an apartment and a bed, we shared nothing else. What powered our relationship was the thinnest of fuels, the pale petrol of nostalgia, that and such little momentum as remembered passion can supply.

I think we made love three times that final summer. *Made*

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love! Preposterous euphemism for fucking, almost as bad as the most grotesque of all, *slept together.* Whatever Sundara and I made, in those three pressings of flesh to flesh, love couldn't have been the commodity; we made sweat, we made rumpled sheets, we made heavy breathing, we even made orgasms, but love? Love? The love was there, encapsulated within me and perhaps even within her too, made long before, laid down in a cache like wine of the *premiere cru,* like precious capital stored away, and when our bodies grappled in the dark on those three clammy summer nights we were at that moment not making love but drawing on an existing and dwindling deposit. Living off assets.

Three times in three months. Not too many months ago we had managed a better tally than that in any given five-day span, but that was before the mysterious glassy barrier had unexpectedly descended between us. Her supple sultry body had lost none of its beauty in my eyes. But these days it seemed to me that sex between Sundara and me was irrelevant, inappropriate, an obsolete interchange in a demonetized currency. We had nothing to offer one another now except our bodies, and with all other levels of contact between us eroded away the body-to-body one had become worse than meaingless.

The last time we — made love, slept together, performed the act, fucked — was six days before Carvajal passed his sentence of death on the marriage. I didn't know then that it would be the last time, though I suppose I should have, if I had been half the prophet that people were paying me to be. Thursday the 30th of September, it was, a mild night on the cusp between summer and autumn. We were out with old friends that Thursday night, the Caldecott three-group, Tim and Beth and Corinne. Dinner at the Bubble, sky-show afterwards. Tim and I had belonged to the same tennis club long ago, and we had once won a mixed-doubles tournament, which was enough of a bond to have kept us in touch ever since; he was long-legged, easy-going, vastly wealthy, and entirely apolitical. We drank too much, we boned too very much, we carried on a playful five-way flirtation that looked for a time to have me heading toward bed with any two of the Caldecott trio — most likely Tim and gold-haired Corinne — while Sundara settled in with the other. But as the evening unfolded I detected strong signals coming my way from Sundara. Surprise! Was she so boned she had forgotten I was only her husband? Was she

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indulging in a Transit unpredictability process? Or had it been so long since our last screw that I seemed a tempting novelty to her? I don't know. I never will. But the warmth of her sudden glance set off a light-pumping resonance between us that quickly became incandescent, and we excused ourselves from the Caldecotts with delicacy and gaiety — they are such natural aristocrats of sensibility that there were no hard feelings. no intimations of rejections, and we parted gracefully, talking of another get-together soon — and Sundara and I hurried home. Still resonating, still incandescent.

Nothing happened to snap the mood. Our clothes fell away, our bodies moved close together. Not tonight the elaborate *Kama Sutra* rituals of foreplay; she was in heat, so was I, and like animals we interpenetrated. She gave an odd little quivering sigh as I went into her, a husky sound that seemed to hit several notes at once, like a sound from one of those medieval Indian instruments that were tuned only to minor keys and produced sad twanging modal tone clusters. Perhaps she knew then that this was the final joining of our flesh. I moved against her with the assurance that I could do no wrong: if ever I followed the script, it was then, no premeditation, no calculation, no separation of self from deed — myself as moving point on the face of the continuum, figure and ground merged and indistinguishable, perfectly in tune with the vibrations of the instant. I lay above her, clasping her in my arms, the classic western position but one which we — with our shared repertoire of Oriental variations — rarely adopted. My back and hips felt as strong as tempered Damascene steel, resilient as the most polymerized of plastics, and I swung inward and upward, inward and upward, inward and upward, moving with easy confident strokes, lifting her as though on jeweled ratchets to ever-higher levels of sensation and not incidentally bringing myself up there too. For me it was a flawless screw, born of fatigue and despair and intoxication and confusion, an I - don't - have - anything - left - to - lose kind of copulation. There was no reason why it couldn't have gone on right through until morning. Sundara clung tight to me, matching my thrusts perfectly. Her knees were drawn almost to her breasts, and as I ran my hands down the satin of her skin, I encountered, again and again, the cool metal of the Transit emblem strapped to her thigh — she never took it off, *never* — and even that didn't shatter the perfection. But of course it wasn't an act of love: it was a mere athletic event, two

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matchless discoboli moving in tandem through the prescribed and preordained rituals of their specialty, and what did love have to do with that? There was love in me for her, yes, a desperate hungry tremble - and - scratch - and - bite kind of love, but there was no longer a way to express any of that, in or out of bed.

So we collected our Olympic gold medals, the high dive and the trampoline dance, the 300-kilo press and the fancy figure skating, the pole vault and the 400-meter hurdles, and by imperceptible nudgings and murmurings we clued one another closer to the ultimate moment, and then we were there, and for an unending interval we were dissolved into the fount of creation, and then the unending interval ended and we fell away from one another, sweaty and sticky and exhausted.

"Would you mind getting me a glass of water?" Sundara asked after a few minutes.

Which was how it ended.

Now you file for a divorce, said Carvajal six days later.

30.

Give yourself to me, that was the deal, no questions asked, nothing guaranteed. No questions asked. But this time I had to ask. Carvajal was pushing me toward a step that I couldn't take without some sort of explanation.

"You promised not to ask," he said sulkily.

"Nevertheless. Give me a clue or the deal's off."

He tried to stare me down. But those blank eyes of his, sometimes so fiercely unanswerable, didn't intimidate me now. My hunch-function said I should go ahead, press him, demand to know the structure of events into which I was entering. Carvajal resisted. He squirmed and sweated and told me that I was setting my training back by weeks or even months.

"No," I said. "I love her, and even today divorce is no joke. I can't do it on a whim."

"Your training —"

"To hell with that. Why should I leave my wife, other than the simple fact that we haven't been getting along very well lately? Breaking up with Sundara isn't like changing my haircut, you know."

"Of course it is."

"What?"

"All events are equal in the long run," he said.

I snorted. "Don't talk garbage. Different acts have different consequences, Carvajal. Whether I wear my hair short or long can't have much effect on surrounding events. But marriages sometimes produce children, and children are

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unique genetic constellations, and the children that Sundara and I might produce, if we chose to produce any, would be different from children that she or I might have with other mates, and the differences — Christ, if we break up I might marry someone else and become the great-great-grandfather of the next Napoleon, and if I stay with her I might — well, how can you say that in the long run all events are equal?"

"You grasp things very slowly," said Carvajal sadly.

"What?"

"I wasn't speaking of consequences. Merely of events. All events are equal *in their probability*, Lew, by which I mean that there's total probability of any event happening that is going to happen —"

"Tautology!"

"Yes. But we deal in tautologies, you and I. I tell you, I *see* you divorcing Sundara, just as I *saw* you getting that haircut, and so those events are of equal probability.

I closed my eyes. I sat still a long while.

Eventually I said, "Tell me *why* I divorce her. Isn't there any hope of repairing the relationship? We aren't fighting. We don't have serious disagreements about money. We think alike on most things. We've lost touch with each other, yes, but that's all, just a drifting toward different spheres. Don't you think we could get back together if we both made a sincere effort?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't I try it instead of —"

"You'd have to go into Transit," he said.

I shrugged. "I think I could manage that if I had to. If the only alternative was losing Sundara."

"You couldn't. It's alien to you, Lew. It opposes everything you believe and everything you're working towards."

"But to keep Sundara —"

"You've lost her."

"Only in the future. She's still my wife."

"What's lost in the future is lost now."

"I refuse to —"

"You have to!" he cried. "It's all one, Lew, it's all one! You've come this far with me and you don't see that?"

I saw it. I knew every argument he was likely to muster, and I believed them all, and my belief wasn't something laid on from outside, like walnut paneling, but rather something intrinsic, something that had grown and spread within me over these past months. And still I resisted. Still I looked for loopholes. I was still clutching for any straw that eddied around

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me in the maelstrom, even as I was being sucked under.

I said, "Finish telling me. Why is it necessary and inevitable that I leave Sundara?"

"Because her destiny lies with Transit and yours lies as far from Transit as you can stay. They work toward uncertainty, you toward certainty. They try to undermine, you want to build. It's a fundamental philosophical gulf that's going to keep on getting wider and can't ever be bridged. So the two of you have to part."

"How soon?"

"You'll be living alone before the end of the year," he told me. "I've *seen* you several times in your new place."

"No woman living with me?"

"No."

"I'm not good at celibacy. I haven't had much practice."

"You'll have women, Lew. But you'll live alone."

"Sundara gets the condo?"

"Yes."

"And the paintings, the sculptures, the —"

"I don't know," Carvajal said, looking bored. "I really haven't paid any attention to details like that. You know they don't matter to me."

"I know."

He let me go. I walked about three miles uptown, seeing nothing around me, hearing nothing, thinking nothing. I was one with the void; I was a member of the vast emptiness. At the corner of Something Street and God-Knows-What Avenue I found a phone booth and dropped a token in the slot and dialed Haig Mardikian's office, and vipped my way through the shield of receptionists until Mardikian himself was on the line. "I'm getting divorced," I told him, and listened for a moment to the silent roaring of his amazement, booming across the wire like the surf at Fire Island in a March storm. "I don't care about the financial angles," I said after a bit. "I just want a clean break. Give me the name of a lawyer you trust, Haig. Somebody who'll do it fast without hurting her."

31.

In waking dreams I imagine a time when I am truly able to *see*. My vision pierces the murky invisible sphere that surrounds us all, and I penetrate into the realm of light. I have been asleep, I have been imprisoned, I have been blind, and now, now that the transformation has come upon me, it is like an awakening. My chains are gone; my eyes are open. About me move slow uncertain shadow-shrouded figures, blind and stumbling, their faces gray with bewilderment and uncertainty.

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These figures are you. And among you and about you I dance, my eyes luminous, my body ablaze with the joy of new perception. It has been like living beneath the sea, bent under a terrible pressure and held away from the tantalizing brightness by that membrane, flexible yet impenetrable, that is the interface between sea and sky; and now I have broken through it, into a place where everything glows and gleams, everything is haloed with radiance, shimmering in gold and violet and scarlet. Yes. Yes. At last I *see*.

What do I *see?*

I *see* the sweet and tranquil earth upon which our dramas are played. I *see* the sweaty struggles of the blind and deaf, buffeted as they strive by an incomprehensible fate. I *see* the years unrolling like the long uncoiling fronds of spring ferns, bright green at the tips, stretching away from me into infinity. In brilliant flashes of intermittent illumination I *see* decades sprouting into centuries and centuries becoming eons and epochs. I *see* the slow procession of the seasons, the systole and diastole of winter and summer, autumn and spring, the whole delicately interlocked rhythm of warmth and cold, of drought and rain, of sunlight and mist and darkness.

There are no limits to my vision. Here are the labyrinths of tomorrow's cities, rising and falling and rising again, New York in lunatic growth, tower piled on tower, the old foundations becoming the rubble on which the new foundations rest, layer upon layer down below like the jumbled strata of Schliemann's Troy. Through twisted streets scuttle strangers in unfamiliar clothing, speaking a jargon beyond my understanding. Machines walk about on jointed legs. Mechanical birds, twittering like creaky gates, flutter overhead. All is in flux. Look, the ocean recedes, and slippery brown beasts lie stranded and gasping on the naked sea floor! Look, the sea returns, lapping at the ancient highways that span the city's margin! Look, the sky is green! Look, the rain is black! Look, here is change, here is transformation, here are the whims of time! I *see* it all!

These are the eternal motions of the galaxies, dim and fathomless. These are the precessing equinoxes, these are the shifting sands. The sun is very warm. Words have become needle sharp. I catch quick glimpses of great entities sprouting and rising and decaying and dying. These are the boundaries of the empire of the toads. This wall marks the place where the republic of the long-legged insects begins. Man himself

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changes. His body is transformed many times, he becomes gross and then pure and then more gross than ever, he evolves strange organs that tremble like tuning forks from the nodes of his leathery skin, he has no eyes and is seamless from lips to scalp, he has many eyes, he is covered with eyes, he is no longer male and female but functions in the form of some intermediate sex, he is tiny, he is vast, he is liquid, he is metallic, he leaps across the starry spaces, he huddles in moist caverns, he floods the planet with legions of his own kind, he diminishes by choice to a few dozen, he shakes his fist at a red swollen sky, he sings frightening songs in a nasal drone, he gives love to monsters, he abolishes death, he basks like a mighty whale in the sea, he becomes a horde of buzzing insectlike toilers, he pitches his tent in blazing diamond-bright desert sands, he laughs with the sound of drums, he lies down with dragons, he writes poems of grass, he builds vessels of air, he becomes a god, he becomes a demon, he is everything, he is nothing.

The continents move ponderously about, like hippopotamuses doing a stately polka. The moon dips low in the sky, peering out of its own forehead like an aching white blister, and shatters with a wonderful glassy *ping!* that reverberates for years. The sun itself drifts from its moorings, for everything in the universe is in constant motion and the journeys are infinitely various. I *see* it slide into the gulf of night, and I wait for it to return, but it does not return, and a sleeve of ice glides over the black skin of the planet, and those who live at that time become things of the night, cold-loving, self-sustaining. And across the ice come hard-breathing beasts from whose nostrils fog issues, and from the ice come flowers of blue and yellow crystal, and in the sky shines a new light, I know not from where.

What do I *see*, what do I *see?*

These are the leaders of mankind, the new kings and emperors, holding their batons of office aloft and summoning fire from the mountaintops. These are the gods yet unimagined. These are the shamans and warlocks. These are the singers, these the poets, these the makers of images. These are the new rites. These are the fruits of war. Look: lovers, killers, dreamers, seers! Look: generals, priests, explorers, lawgivers! There are unknown continents to find. There are untasted apples to eat. Look! Madmen! Courtesans! Heroes! Victims! I *see* the schemes. I *see* the mistakes. I *see* the miraculous achievements, and they bring tears of pride to my

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eyes. Here is the daughter of your daughter's daughter. Here is the son of your sons beyond reckoning. These are nations still unknown; these are nations newly reborn. What is this language, all clicks and hisses? What is this music, all stabs and snarls? Rome will fall again. Babylon will come a second time, and lie astride the world like a great gray octopus. How wondrous are the times to come! All that you can ever imagine will befall, and more, much more, and I *see* it all.

Are these the things I *see?*

Are all doors open to me? Are all walls made into windows?

Do I look upon the murdered prince and the newborn savior, on the fires of the destroyed empire burning on the horizon, on the tomb of the lord of lords, on the hard-eyed voyagers setting forth across the golden sea that spans the belly of the transformed world? Do I survey the million million tomorrows of the race, and drink it all down, and make the future's flesh my own? The heavens falling? The stars colliding? What are these unfamiliar constellations that shape and reshape themselves as I watch? Who are these masked faces? What does this stone idol, tall as three mountains, represent? When will the cliffs that wall the sea be ground to red powder? When will the polar ice descend like inexorable night upon the fields of red flowers? Who owns these fragments? Oh, what do I *see,* what do I *see?*

All of time, all of space.

No. Of course it won't be like that. All I'll *see* is what I can send myself out of my own few scruffy tomorrows. Brief dull messages, like the vague transmissions of the tin-can telephones we built as boys: no epic splendors, no baroque apocalypses. Yet even those blurred and muffled sounds are more than I could have hoped to have, when I was asleep like you, when I was one of those blind and stumbling figures moving in clumsy sluggish lurches through the kingdom of shadows that is this world.

32.

Mardikian found me a lawyer. He was Jason Komurjian — another Armenian, of course, one of the partners in Mardikian's own firm, the divorce specialist, a vast fullback of a man with oddly sad little eyes set close together within a massive swarthy slab of a face.

We conferred in his office on the 95th floor of the Martin Luther King Building, a dark incense-ridden office almost rivaling Bob Lombroso's for pomp and circumstance, a place as rich and heavy in ornamentation as the imperial

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chapel of a Byzantine cathedral. "Divorce," Komurjian said dreamily, "you wish to obtain a divorce, yes, to terminate, yes, a final parting," rotating the concept in the vast vaulted arenas of his consciousness as though it were some fine point of theology, as though we were talking about the consubstantiality of the Father and Son or the doctrine of the apostolic succession. "Yes, it should be possible to obtain that for you. You live separately now?"

"Not yet."

He looked displeased. His heavy lips sagged, his beefy face took on a deeper hue. "This must be done," he said. "Continued cohabitation endangers the plausibility of any suit for termination of matrimony. Even today, even today. Establish separate lodgings. Establish separate financial conduits. Demonstrate your purposes, my friend. Eh?" He reached for an ornate jeweled crucifix on his desk, a thing of rubies and emeralds, and played with it, running thick fingers over its sleek well-worn surface, and for a time he was lost in his own ruminations. I imagined the tones of an unseen organ; I saw a procession of bedecked and bearded priests strolling through the choirs of his mind. He looked up, spearing me with an unexpectedly intent stare. "Grounds?"

"No, not that kind of divorce. We just want to break it up, to go our individual ways, a simple termination."

"Of course you've discussed this with Mrs. Nichols and come to a preliminary understanding."

I reddened. "Ah — not yet," I said, uneasy.

Komurjian plainly disapproved. "You must introduce the subject at some point, you realize. Presumably her reaction will be tranquil. Then her lawyer and I will meet and the thing will be done." He reached for a memo belt. "As for division of property —"

"She can have whatever she wants."

"*Whatever?*" He sounded amazed.

"I don't want a hassle with her over anything."

Komurjian spread his hands before me on the desk. "What if she demands everything?" he asked. "All the assets in common? You yield without contest?"

"She won't do that."

"Is she not of allegiance to the Transit Creed?"

Startled, I said, "How do you know that?"

"Haig and I have discussed the case, you must realize."

"I see."

"And Transit people are unpredictable."

I managed a choked laugh. "Yes. Very."

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"She might whimsically ask for all the assets," Komurjian said.

"Or whimsically ask for none."

"Or none, true. One never knows. Are you instructing me to accept whatever position she takes?"

"Let's wait and see," I said. "She's basically a reasonable person, I think. It's my feeling that she won't make any unusual demand about division of property."

"And settlement of income?" the lawyer asked. "She will want no continuing payments from you? You have a standard two-group contract, yes?"

"Yes. Termination ends all financial responsibility."

Komurjian began to hum, very quietly, almost beneath my threshold of hearing. Almost. How routine all this must seem to him, this severing of sacramental unions! "Then there should be no problems, yes? But you must announce your intentions to your wife, Mr. Nichols, before we go further."

Which I did. Sundara was now so busy with her manifold Transit activities — her process sessions, her volatility circles, her ego-decay exercises, her missionary duties, and all the rest — that close to a week passed before I was able to have a quiet word with her at home. By then I had rehearsed the whole thing in my head a thousand times, so that the lines were worn like tracks; if ever there was an instance of following the script, this would be it.

Almost apologetically, as though it were an intrusion on her privacy for me to request the privilege of a conversation with her, I said early one evening that I wanted to talk to her about something important; and then I told her, as I had so often heard myself telling her, that I was going to get a divorce. Saying it, I understood something of what it must be like for Carvajal to *see*, because I had lived this scene so often in imagination that it already felt like an event of the past to me.

Sundara regarded me thoughtfully, saying nothing, displaying neither surprise nor annoyance nor hostility nor enthusiasm nor dismay nor despair.

Her silence baffled me.

I said, eventually, "I've hired Jason Komurjian as my lawyer. One of Mardikian's partners. He'll sit down with your lawyer, when you've got one, and they'll work everything out. I want this to be a civilized parting of the ways, Sundara."

She smiled. Mona Lisa of Bombay.

"You don't have anything to say?" I asked.

"Not really."

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"Is divorce such a trifle to you?"

"Divorce and marriage are aspects of the same illusion, my love."

"This world seems more real to me than it does to you, I think. That's one reason why it doesn't appear to be a good idea for us to go on living together."

She said, "Will there be a messy fight about dividing the things we own?"

"I told you I want this to be civilized."

"Good. So do I."

"Do all Transit people accept great upheavals in their lives so casually?" I asked.

"Is this a great upheaval?"

"It seems like one to me."

"To me it seems only the ratifying of a decision made a long time ago."

"It's been a bad time," I admitted. "But even at the worst of it, I always kept telling myself it's just a phase, it's a passing thing, every marriage goes through it, we'll get back together eventually."

As I spoke, I found myself convincing myself that all that was still true, that Sundara and I could still work out a continuing relationship like the basically reasonable human beings we were. And yet here I was asking her to hire a lawyer. I remembered Carvajal telling me, *You've lost her,* with inexorable finality in his voice. But he had been speaking of the future, not the past.

She said, "Now you think it's hopeless, is that it? What made you change your mind?"

"Well?"

"*Did* you change your mind?"

I said nothing.

"I don't think you really want a divorce, Lew."

"I do," I insisted hoarsely.

"So you say."

"I'm not asking you to read my mind, Sundara. Just to go along with the legal rigmarole we have to follow in order to be free to live our separate lives."

"You don't want a divorce, but yet you do. How strange, Lew. An attitude like that is a perfect Transit situation, you know, what we call a keying-point, a situation where you hold opposing positions simultaneously and try to reconcile them. There are three possible outcomes of that. Are you interested in hearing this? One possibility is schizophrenia. One is self-deception, as when you pretend to embrace both alternatives but really don't. And the third is the condition of illumination known in Transit as —"

"Please, Sundara."

"I thought you were interested."

"I guess I'm not."

She studied me for a long

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moment. Then she smiled. "This divorce business is connected somehow with your gift of precognition, isn't it? You don't really want a divorce now, even though we aren't getting along very well, but you nevertheless think you *ought* to start arranging a divorce, because you've had a hunch that sometime in the near future you're going to have one, and — isn't that right, Lew? Come on: tell me the truth. I won't be angry."

"You aren't far off the mark," I said.

"I thought not. Well, what shall we do?"

"Work out terms of a separation," I replied grimly. "Hire a lawyer, Sundara."

"And if I don't?"

"You mean you'll contest it?"

"I never said that. I simply don't want to deal through a lawyer. Let's handle it ourselves, Lew. Like civilized human beings."

"I'll have to check with Komurjian about that. That way may be civilized, but it may not be smart."

"Do you think I'll cheat you?"

"I don't think anything any more."

She walked up to me. Her eyes glowed; her body radiated a throbbing sensuality. I was helpless before her. She could have had anything from me. Sundara kissed the tip of my nose and said huskily, stagily, "If you want a divorce, darling, you can have your divorce. Whatever you want. I won't stand in the way. I want you to be happy. I love you, you know." She smiled wickedly. Oh, that Transit mischief! "Whatever you want," she said.

33.

I rented an apartment for myself in Manhattan, a three-room furnished job in an old, once-luxurious high rise on East 63rd near Second Avenue, which is an old, once-luxurious neighborhood not yet seriously into disrepair. The building's pedigree was evidenced by an assortment of security devices dating from the 1960's or thereabouts through the early 1990's, everything from police locks and hidden peepholes up to early-model filter-mazes and velocity-screens. The futniture was simple and timeless in style, venerable and utilitarian, couches and chairs and bed and tables and bookcases and stuff of that sort, so anonymous as to be invisible. I felt invisible too, after I was completely moved in and movers and the building superintendent had gone away, leaving me standing alone in my new living room like an ambassador newly arrived from nowhere to take up residence in

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limbo. What was this place, and how had it happened that I was living here? Whose chairs are these? Whose fingerprints on the bare blue walls?

Sundara had let me take some of the paintings and sculptures, and I set them up here and there; they had seemed magnificently integral to the lavish textures of our Staten Island condo, but here they looked awkward and unnatural, penguins in the veldt. There were no spotlights here, no cunning arrangements of solenoids and rheostats, no carpeted pedestals: just low ceilings, dirty walls, windows without opaquers. Yet I felt no self-pity, finding myself here, only confusion, emptiness, dislocation. I spent the first day unpacking, organizing, setting up the *lares* and *penates,* working slowly and inefficiently, pausing often to think about nothing in particular. I slept alone, and, to my surprise, I slept very well. In the morning I phoned Carvajal and told him what had been happening.

He grunted his approval and said, "You have a view of Second Avenue from your bedroom window?"

"Yes. And 63rd Street from the living room. Why?"

"Light-blue walls?"

"Yes."

"A dark couch?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just checking," he said "To make certain you found the right place."

"You mean, that I found the one you've been *seeing?*"

"That's right."

"Was there any doubt?" I asked. "Have you stopped trusting the things you *see?*"

"Not for a moment. But do you?"

"I trust you, I trust you. What color is my bathroom sink?"

"I don't know," Carvajal said. "I've never bothered to notice. But your refrigerator is light brown."

"Okay, already. I'm impressed."

"I hope so. Are you ready to take notes?"

I found a scratchpad. "Go ahead," I said.

"Thursday, October 21. Quinn will fly to Louisiana next week for a meeting with Governor Thibodaux. Afterward Quinn issues a statement declaring his support for the Plaquemines Project. When he gets back to New York he fires Housing Commissioner Ricciardi and gives the job to Charles Lewisohn. Ricciardi is named to the Racing Authority. And then—"

I took it all down, shaking my head as usual, hearing Quinn mutter, *What's Thibodaux to me? Why should I give a crap about the Plaquemines Dam? I thought dams were obsolete, anyway. And*

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Ricciardi's been doing a reasonably good job, considering his limited intelligence; won't it offend the Italians if I kick him upstairs like that? Et cetera, et cetera. More and more frequently, these days, I had been coming to Quinn with bizarre stratagems, inexplicable and implausible, for now the pipeline from Carvajal was flowing freely out of the immediate future, carrying advice for me to relay to Quinn on how best to maneuver and manipulate; Quinn went along with everything I suggested, but sometimes I was hard put to make him do the things I asked him to do. One of these days he'd turn down an idea outright and would not be budged; what would happen then to Carvajal's unalterable future?

I was at City Hall the customary time the next day, and by half past nine I had my latest batch of memos ready for the mayor. I sent them in. A little after ten, my intercom bleeped and a voice said that Deputy Mayor Mardikian wanted to see me.

There was going to be trouble. I felt it intuitively as I went down the hall, and I saw it all over Mardikian's face as I entered his office. He looked uncomfortable — edgy, off center, tense. His eyes were too bright and he was chewing at the corner of his lip. My newest memoranda were spread out in pattern on his desk.

He said, hardly looking up at me, "Lew, what the hell is this garbage about Ricciardi?"

"It's advisable to remove him from his current job."

"I know it's advisable. You just advised us. *Why* is it advisable?"

"Long-range dynamics dictate it," I said, trying to bluff. "I can't give you any convincing and concrete reason, but my feeling is that it's unwise to keep a man in that job who's so closely identified with the Italian-American community. Lewisohn's a good neutral nonabrasive figure who might be safer in that slot next year as we approach the mayoralty election, and —"

"Quit it, Lew."

"What?"

"Knock it off. You aren't telling me a thing. You're just giving me a lot of noise. Quinn thinks Ricciardi's been doing decent work, and he's upset about your memo, and when I ask you for supportive data, you just shrug and say it's a hunch. Now also —"

"My hunches have always —"

"Wait," Mardikian said. "This Louisiana thing. Christ! Thibodaux is the antithesis of everything Quinn has been trying to stand for. Why in *hell* should the mayor haul his ass all the way down to Baton Rouge to embrace an antediluvian bigot and espouse a useless and

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controversial and ecologically risky dam-building project? Quinn's got everything to lose and nothing visible to gain from that, unless you think it'll help him get the redneck vote in 2004 and you think the redneck vote is going to be vital to his chances, which God help us all if it is. Well?"

"I can't explain it, Haig."

"You can't explain it? You can't explain it? You give the mayor a highly explicit instruction like this, or like the Ricciardi thing, something that obviously has to have been the product of a whole lot of complicated thinking, and you don't know why? If you don't know why, how are we supposed to? Where's the rational basis for our actions? You want the mayor to be wandering around like a sleepwalker, like some sort of zombie, just doing as you say and not knowing why? Come on, kid! A hunch is a hunch, but we've hired you to make rational comprehensible projections, not to be a soothsayer."

Quietly I said, after a long wobbly pause, "Haig, I've been going through a lot of bad stuff lately, and I don't have much reserve of energy. I don't want to have a heavy hassle with you now. I'm just asking you to take it on faith that there's logic in the things I propose."

"I can't."

"Please?"

"Look, I realize that having your marriage fall apart has really ripped you up, Lew, but that's exactly why I have to challenge what you've handed in today. For months now you've been giving us these weird trips, and sometimes you justify them convincingly and sometimes you don't; sometimes you give us the most shamelessly cockeyed reasons for some course of action, and without exception Quinn has ultimately gone along with all your advice, frequently against his own better judgment. And I have to admit that so far everything has worked out surprisingly well. But now — but now—" He looked up, and his eyes drilled into mine. "Frankly, Lew, we're starting to have some doubts about your stability. We don't know if we ought to trust your suggestions as blindly as we have in the past."

"Jesus!" I cried. "You think that breaking up with Sundara has destroyed my sanity?"

"I think it's taken a lot out of you," Mardikian said, speaking more gently. "You yourself used the phrase about not having much reserve of energy. Frankly, Lew, we think you're under a strain, we think you're fatigued, weary, groggy, that you've overtaxed yourself seriously, that you can use a rest. And we—"

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"Who's *we?*"

"Quinn. Lombroso. Me."

"What has Lombroso been saying about me?"

"Mainly that he's been trying to get you to take a vacation since last August."

"What else?"

Mardikian looked puzzled. "What do you mean, what else? What do you think he'd say? Christ, Lew, you're sounding awfully paranoid all of a sudden. Bob's your friend, remember? He's on your side. We're all on your side. He told you to go up to so-and-so's hunting lodge, but you wouldn't. He's worried about you. We all are. Now we'd like to put it a little more strongly. We feel you *need* a rest, Lew, and we want you to take one. City Hall won't fall apart if you aren't around for a few weeks."

"Okay. I'll go on vacation. I could use one, sure. But one favor, first."

"Go on."

"The Thibodaux thing and the Ricciardi thing. I want you to put them through and have Quinn do them."

"If you'll give me some plausible justification."

"I can't, Haig." Suddenly I was sweating all over. "Nothing that would sound convincing. But it's important that the mayor go along with those recommendations."

"Why?"

"It is. Very important."

"To you or to Quinn?"

It was a shrewd shot, and it hit me hard. *To me,* I thought, *to me, to Carvajal, to the whole pattern of faith and belief I've been constructing.* Had the moment of truth come at last? Had I handed Quinn instructions that he would refuse to follow? And what then? The paradoxes sprouting from such a negative decision dizzied me. I felt sick.

"Important to everybody," I said. "Please. As a favor. I haven't given him any bad advice up to now, have I?"

"He's hostile to this. He needs to know something of the projective structure behind these suggestions."

Almost panicky, I said, "Don't push me too hard, Haig. I'm right at the brink. But I'm not crazy. Exhausted, maybe, yes, but not crazy, and the stuff I handed in this morning makes sense, it *will* make sense, it'll be perfectly apparent in three months, five, six, whenever. Look at me. Look me right in the eye. I'll take that vacation. I appreciate the fact that you're all worried about me. But I want this one favor from you, Haig. Will you go in there and tell Quinn to follow those memos? For my sake. For the sake of all the years we've known each other. I tell

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you, those memos are kosher." I halted. I was babbling, I knew, and the more I said, the less likely it was that Haig would risk taking me seriously. Did he already see me as a dangerously unstable lunatic? Were the men in the white coats waiting in the corridor? What chance was there, actually, that anybody would pay heed to this morning's memos? I felt pillars tumbling, the sky falling.

Then Mardikian said, astonishingly, smiling warmly, "All right, Lew. It's nutty, but I'll do it. Just this once. You get yourself off to Hawaii or somewhere and sit on the beach for a couple of weeks. And I'll go in there and talk Quinn into firing Ricciardi and visiting Louisiana and all the rest. I think it's crazy advice, but I'll gamble on your track record." He left his desk and came around to me, towering above me, and, abruptly, clumsily, he pulled me to him and gave me a hug. "You worry me, kid," he muttered.

34.

I took a vacation. Not the beaches of Hawaii — too crowded, too hectic, too far away — and not the hunting lodge in Canada, for the snows of late autumn would already be descending there; I went off to golden California, Carlos Socorro's California, to magnificent Big Sur, where another friend of Lombroso's conveniently managed to own an isolated redwood cottage on an acre of clifftop overlooking the ocean. For ten restless days I lived in rustic solitude, with the densely wooded slopes of the Santa Lucia Mountains, dark and mysterious and ferny, to my back, and the broad breast of the Pacific before me, five hundred feet below. It was, they had assured me, the finest time of the year in Big Sur, the idyllic season that separates the summer's fogs from the winter's rains; and indeed it was so, with warm sunlit days and cool starry nights and an astonishing purple-and-gold sunset every evening. I hiked in the silent redwood groves, I swam in chilly, swift mountain streams, I scrambled down rocks thick with cascading glossy-leaved succulents to the beach and the turbulent surf. I watched cormorants and gulls at their dinners, and, one morning, a comical sea otter, swimming belly-up fifty meters off shore as he munched on a crab.

But peace eluded me. I thought too much about Sundara, wondering in a blank, baffled way how I had come to lose her; I fretted about dreary political matters that any sane man would have banished from his mind in such stunning surroundings; I invented complex entropic catastrophes that might

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occur if Quinn failed to go to Louisiana. Living in paradise, I contrived to be twitchy and tense and ill at ease.

Yet slowly I allowed myself to feel refreshed. Slowly the magic of the lush coastline, miraculously preserved throughout a century in which almost everything else had been spoiled, worked itself on my stale and tangled soul.

Possibly I *saw* for the first time while I was in Big Sur.

I'm not sure. Months of proximity to Carvajal hadn't yet produced any definite results. I knew now the tricks Carvajal used to induce the state, I knew the symptoms of an oncoming vision, I felt certain that before much longer I'd be *seeing*, but I had had no certain visionary experience, and the harder I tried to attain one, of course, the more distant my goal appeared. But there was one odd moment late in my stay in Big Sur. I had been to the beach, and now, toward the end of the afternoon, I was climbing swiftly up the steep trail to the cottage, getting tired fast, breathing hard, enjoying the heady dizziness that was coming over me as I deliberately pushed heart and lungs to their limits. Reaching a sharp switchback, I paused for a moment, turning to look back and down, and the glare of the dipping sun reverberating off the surface of the sea hit me and dazzled me, so that I swayed and shivered and had to clutch at a bush to keep from falling. And in that moment it seemed to me — it seemed, it was only an illusory sensation, a brief subliminal flicker — that I was staring through the golden fire of the sunlight banner rippling above a mighty concrete plaza, and the face of Paul Quinn looked at me out of the center of the banner, a powerful face, a commanding face, and the plaza was full of people, thousands of them jammed together, hundreds of thousands, waving their arms, shouting wildly, saluting the banner, a mob, an immense collective entity lost in hysteria, in Quinn-worship. It could just as easily have been 1934, Nuremberg, a different face on the banner, weird hyperthyroid eyes and stiff black mustache, and what they were shouting could just as easily have been, *Sieg! Heil! Sieg! Heil!* I gasped and fell to my knees, stricken by dizziness, fear, amazement, awe, I know not what, and I moaned and put my hands to my face, and then the vision was gone, then the afternoon breeze swept banner and mob from my throbbing brain, and nothing lay before me but the endless Pacific.

Did I *see*? Had the veil of time parted for me? Was Quinn the coming *fuhrer*, was he tomorrow's *duce?* Or had my weary mind

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conspired with my weary body to spawn a quick paranoid flash, crazy imaginings and nothing more? I didn't know. I still don't. I have my theory, and my theory is that I *saw*, but never have I *seen* that banner again, never have I heard the terrible resonating shouts of that ecstatic mob, and until the day of the banner is actually upon us I will not know the truth.

Eventually, deciding that I had sequestered myself in the woods long enough to re-establish my standing at City Hall as a stable and trustworthy adviser, I flew home to New York, to my dusty, untended flat on 63rd Street. Not much had changed. The days were shorter, now that November had come, and autumn's haze had yielded to the first sharp blasts of the onrushing winter, slicing crosswise through the city from river to river. The mayor, *mirabile dictu*, had been to Louisiana, and to the displeasure of *The New York Times'* editorial writers had advocated construction of the dubious Plaquemines Dam, had been photographed embracing Governor Thibodaux: Quinn looked sourly determined, smiling the way a man might smile who had been hired to hug a cactus.

Next I went out to Brooklyn to visit Carvajal.

It was a month since I had seen him, but he looked very much more than a month older — sallow, shrunken, eyes dim and watery, a tremor in his hands. He hadn't seemed so wasted and worn since our first meeting, in Bob Lombroso's office, back in March; all the strength he had gained in the spring and summer now was gone from him, all the sudden vitality which perhaps he had drawn from his relationship with me. Not perhaps: surely. For, minute by minute, as we sat and talked, color returned to him, the gleam of energy reappeared in his features.

I told him what had happened on the hillside in Big Sur. "Possibly a beginning," he said softly. "Eventually it has to start. Why not there?"

"If I did *see*, though, what did the vision mean? Quinn with banners? Quinn exciting a mob?"

"How would I know?" Carvajal asked.

"You haven't ever *seen* anything like that?"

"Quinn's true time is after mine," he reminded me. His eyes reproached me mildly. Yes: this man had less than six months to live, and knew it, down to the hour, to the moment. He said, "Possibly you can remember how old Quinn seemed to be, in your vision. The color of the hair, the lines in the face —"

I tried to remember. Quinn was

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only 38 now. How old was the man whose face had filled that great banner? I had recognized him instantly as Quinn, and so the changes couldn't have been great. Jowlier than the present Quinn? The blond hair graying at the temples? The lines of that iron grin more deeply incised? I didn't know. I hadn't noticed. Only a fantasy, perhaps. Hallucination born of fatigue. I apologized to Carvajal; I promised to do better the next time, if I were to be granted a next time. He assured me there would be. I would *see,* he said firmly, growing more animated. He was more vigorous the longer we were together. I would *see,* no doubt of that.

He said, "Time for business. New instructions for Quinn."

There was only one thing to convey this time: the mayor was supposed to start shopping around for a new police commissioner, because Commissioner Sudakis was shortly going to resign. That started me. Sudakis had been one of Quinn's best appointments — effective and popular, the closest thing to a hero the New York Police Department had had in a couple of generations, a solid, reliable, incorruptible, personally courageous man. In his first year and a half as head of the depatment he had come to seem a fixture; it was as if he had always been in charge, always would be. He had done a beautiful job transforming the Gestapo that the police had become under the late Mayor Gottfried into a peace-keeping force once again, and the job was not yet done: only a couple of months ago I had heard Sudakis tell the mayor he would need another year and a half to finish the cleanup. Sudakis about to quit? It didn't ring true.

"Quinn won't believe it," I said. "He'll laugh in my face."

Carvajal shrugged. "Sudakis will not longer be police commissioner after the first of the year. The mayor ought to have a capable replacement ready."

"Maybe so. But it's all so damned implausible. Sudakis sits there like the rock of Gibraltar. I can't go in and tell the mayor he's about to quit, even if he is. There was so much static over the Thibodaux and Ricciardi businesses that Mardikian insisted I take a rest cure. If I go in there with something as wild as this, they might have me put away."

Carvajal stared at me imperturbably, implacably.

I said, "At least give me some supporting data. *Why* does Sudakis plan to quit?"

"I don't know."

"Would I get any clues if I approached Sudakis myself?"

"I don't know."

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"You don't know. You don't know. And you don't care, do you? All you know is that he's planning to leave."

"I don't even know that, Lew, Only that he *will* leave. Sudakis may not know it himself yet."

"Oh, fine. Fine! I tell the mayor, the mayor sends for Sudakis, Sudakis denies everything, because as of now it isn't so."

"Reality is always conserved," said Carvajal. "Sudakis will resign. It will happen very suddenly."

"Must I be the one to tell Quinn that? What if I don't say anything? If reality is truly conserved, Sudakis will leave no matter what I do. Isn't that so? Isn't that?"

"Do you want the mayor to be caught unprepared when it happens?"

"Better that than to have the mayor think I'm crazy."

"Are you afraid to warn Quinn about the resignation?"

"Yes."

"What do you think would happen to you?"

"I'll be put in an embarrassing position," I said. "I'll be asked to justify something that makes no sense to me. I'll have to fall back on saying it's a hunch, only a hunch, and if Sudakis denies he's going to quit, I'll lose influence with Quinn. I might even lose my job. Is that what you want?"

"I have no desires whatever," said Carvajal distantly.

"Besides which, Quinn won't let Sudakis quit."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. He needs him too much. He won't accept his resignation. No matter what Sudakis says, he'll stay on the job, and what does that do to the conservation of reality?"

"Sudakis won't stay," Carvajal said indifferently.

I went away and thought about it.

My objections to recommending that Quinn start looking for a successor to Sudakis struck me as logical, reasonable, plausible, and unarguable. I was unwilling to crawl into so exposed a position so soon after my return, when I was still vulnerable to Mardikian's skepticism about my stability. On the other hand, if some unforeseen turn of events *would* force Sudakis to quit, I'd have been derelict in my duties if I had failed to give the mayor the warning. In a city forever on the edge of chaos, even a few days' confusion about lines of authority in the police department could bring matters close to anarchy in the streets, and one thing Quinn really didn't need, as a potential presidential candidate, was a resurgence, however brief, of the lawlessness that had roiled the

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city so often before the repressive Gottfried administration and in the time of the feeble Mayor DiLaurenzio. And on the third hand, I had never before refused to be the vehicle of one of Carvajal's directives, and it troubled me to defy him now. Imperceptibly Carvajal's notions of reality-conservation had become part of me; imperceptibly I had accepted his philosophy to an extent that left me fearful of tampering with the inevitable uncoiling of the inevitable. Feeling a bit like someone who was climbing aboard an ice floe heading downstream in the Niagara River, I found myself resolving to bring the Sudakis story to Quinn, misgivings or no.

But I let a week slide by, hoping the situation would somehow resolve itself without my interference, and then I let most of another week go past, and so I might have allowed the rest of the year to slip away, but I knew I was deluding myself. So I drew up a memo and sent it into Mardikian.

"I'm not going to show this to Quinn," he told me two hours later.

"You have to," I said without much conviction.

"You know what'll happen if I do? He'll have your ass, Lew. I had to do half a day of fancy dancing over Ricciardi and the Louisiana trip, and the things Quinn said about you then weren't very complimentary. He's afraid you're cracking up."

"All of you think that. Well, I'm not. I had a nice sweet vacation in California and I've never felt better in my life. And come next January this town is going to need a new police commissioner."

"No, Lew."

"No?"

Mardikian grunted heavily. He was tolerating me, humoring me; but he was sick of me and my predictions, I knew. He said, "After I got your memo I called in Sudakis and told him there's a rumor going around that he's thinking of quitting. I didn't attribute it. I let him think I got it from one of the boys in the press corps. You should have seen his face, Lew. You'd have thought I'd called his mother a Turk. He swore by seventy saints and fifty angels that the only way he'd leave his job was if the mayor fired him. I can usually tell when a man's putting me on, and Sudakis was as sincere as anybody I've ever seen."

"All the same, Haig, he's going to quit in a month or two."

"How can that be?"

"Unexpected circumstances do arise."

"Such as?"

"Anything. Reasons of health. A sudden scandal in the department. A megabuck job offer from

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San Francisco. I don't know what the exact reason will be. I'm just telling you —"

"Lew, how can you possibly know what Sudakis is going to do in January, when not even Sudakis does?"

"I know," I insisted.

"How can you?"

"It's a hunch."

"A hunch. You keep saying that. It's one hunch too many, Lew. Your skill has to do with interpretation of trends, not with individual predictive instances, right, but more and more you've been coming in with these isolated shots, these crystal-ball stunts, these —"

"Haig, have any of them been wrong?"

"I'm not sure."

"None. Not a one. A lot of them haven't proved out yet, one way or the other, but there isn't one that's been contradicted by later developments, no recommended course of action that has definitely been shown to be unwise, no —"

"All the same, Lew. I told you the last time, we don't believe in soothsayers around here. Stick to broad projections of visible trends, will you?"

"I'm only looking out for Quinn's welfare."

"Sure. But I think you ought to start looking out more for your own."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"That unless your work here takes on, well, a less unconventional tone, the mayor may have to terminate your services."

"Crap. He needs me, Haig."

"He's starting not to think so. He's starting to think you may even be a liability."

"He doesn't realize how much I've done for him, then. He's a thousand kilometers closer to the White House than he would ever have been without me. Listen, Haig, whether or not you and Quinn think I'm crazy, this city is going to wake up without a police commissioner one day in January, and the mayor ought to begin a personnel search this afternoon, and I want you to let him know that."

"I won't. For your own protection," Mardikian said.

"Don't be obstinate."

"Obstinate? *Obstinate?* I'm trying to save your neck."

"What would it hurt if Quinn did quietly start looking for a new commissioner? If Sudakis doesn't quit, Quinn could drop the whole thing and nobody'd need to know. Do I have to be right all the time? I happen to be right about Sudakis, but even if I'm not, what of it? It's a potentially useful bit of information I'm offering, something important if true, and —"

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Mardikian said, "Nobody says you have to be 100 percent right, and of course there'd be no harm in opening a quiet contingency search for a new police commissioner. The harm I'm trying to avoid is to you. Quinn as much as told me that if you show up with one more way-out bit of black-magic prophecy he'd transfer you to the Department of Sanitation, or worse, and he will, Lew, he will. Maybe you've had a tremendous run of luck, pulling stuff like this out of the air, but —"

"It isn't luck, Haig," I told him quietly.

"What?"

"I'm not using stochastic processes at all. I'm not operating by guesswork. I *see*, is what I'm saying, I'm able to look into the future and hear conversations, read headlines, observe events, I can dredge all sorts of data out of time to come." It was only a small lie, displacing Carvajal's powers to myself. Operationally, the results were the same, whichever one of us was doing the *seeing*. "That's why I can't always give supporting data to explain my memos," I said. "I look into January, I *see* Sudakis resigning, and that's all, I don't know why, I don't yet perceive the surrounding structure of cause and effect, only the event itself. It's different from projection of trends, it's something else entirely, wilder, a lot less plausible, but more reliable, 100 percent reliable, 100 percent! Because I can *see* what's going to happen."

Mardikian was silent a very long time.

He said, finally, in a hoarse, cottony voice, "Lew, are you serious?"

"Extremely."

"If I go and get Quinn, will you tell him exactly what you just told me? Exactly?"

"Yes."

"Wait here," he said.

I waited. I tried not to think about anything. Keeping mind a blank, let the stochasticity flow: had I blundered, had I overplayed my hand? I didn't believe so. I believed the time had come for me to reveal something of what I was really up to. For the sake of plausibility I hadn't bothered to mention Carvajal's role in the process, but otherwise I had held nothing back, and I felt a great release from tension, I felt a warm flood of relief surging in me, now that I had come out at last from behind my cover.

After what may have been fifteen minutes Mardikian returned. The mayor was with him. They took a few steps into the office and halted side by side near the door, an oddly mismatched pair, Mardikian dark and absurdly tall, Quinn fair-haired, short,

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thick-bodied. They looked terribly solemn.

Mardikian said, "Tell the mayor what you told me, Lew."

Blithely I repeated my confession of second sight, using, as far as was possible, the same phrases. Quinn listened expressionlessly. When I finished, he said, "How long have you been working for me, Lew?"

"Since the beginning of '96."

"Four years, almost. And how long is it since you've had a direct pipeline into the future?"

"Not long. Only since last spring. You remember, when I urged you to get that oil-gellation bill through the City Council, just before those tankers broke up off Texas and California? It was about then. I wasn't just guessing. And then, the other things, the ones that sometimes seemed so weird —"

"Like having a crystal ball," Quinn said wonderingly.

"Yes. Yes. You remember, Paul, the day you told me you had decided to make a run for the White House in '04, what you said to me? You told me, *'you're going to be the eyes that see into the future for me.'* You didn't know how right you were!"

Quinn said, "I thought if you just went off to rest for a couple of weeks, Lew, it would help you get yourself together. But now I see the problem runs much deeper than that."

"What?"

"You've been a good friend and a valuable adviser for four years. I won't underestimate the value of the help you've provided. Maybe you were getting your ideas from close intuitive analysis of trends, or maybe from computers, or maybe a genie was whispering things in your ear, but wherever you got it, you were giving me useful advice. But I can't risk keeping you on the staff after what I've just heard. If word gets around that Paul Quinn's key decisions are made for him by a guru, by a seer, by some kind of clairvoyant Rasputin, that I'm really nothing but a puppet twitching in the dark, I'm done for, I'm dead. We'll put you on full-time leave, effective today, with your salary continuing through to the end of the fiscal year, all right? That'll give you better than seven months to rebuild your old private consulting business before you're dropped from the municipal payroll. With your divorce and everything, you're probably in a tight financial position, and I don't want to make it any worse. And let's make a deal, you and me: I won't make any public statements about the reasons for your resignation, and you won't make any open claims about the alleged

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origin of the advice you were giving me. Fair enough?"

"You're firing me?" I muttered.

"I'm sorry, Lew."

"I can make you President, Paul!"

"I'll have to get there on my own, I guess."

"You think I'm crazy, don't you," I said.

"That's a harsh word."

"But you do, right? You think you've been getting advice from a dangerous lunatic, and it doesn't matter that the lunatic's advice was always right, you have to get rid of him now, because it would look bad, yes, it would look very bad if people started thinking you had a witch doctor on your staff, and so—"

"Please, Lew," Quinn said. "Don't make this any harder for me." He crossed the room and caught my limp, cold hand in his fierce grip. His face was close to mine. Here it came: the famed Quinn Treatment, once more, one last time. Urgently he said, "Believe me, I'm going to miss you around here. As a friend, as an adviser. I may be making a big mistake. And it's painful to have to do this. But you're right: I can't take the risk, Lew. I can't take the risk."

35.

I cleaned out my desk after lunch and went home, went to what passed for home for me, and wandered around the shabby, half-empty rooms the rest of the afternoon, trying to comprehend what had happened to me. Fired? Yes, fired. I had taken off my mask, and they hadn't liked what was underneath. I had stopped pretending to science and had admitted sorcery; I had told Mardikian the true truth, and now no more would I go to City Hall and sit among the mighty, and no longer would I shape and guide the destinies of the charismatic Paul Quinn, and when he took the oath of office in Washington come January five years hence, I would watch the scene on television from afar, the forgotten man, the shunned man, the leper of the administration. I felt too forlorn even to cry. Wifeless, jobless, purposeless, I roamed my dreary flat for hours, and, wearying of that, stood idly by a window for an hour or more, watching the sky turn leaden, watching the unexpected flakes of the first snowfall begin to descend, watching night spread over Manhattan.

Then anger displaced despair and, furious, I phoned Carvajal.

"Quinn knows," I said. "About the Sudakis resignation. I gave the memo to Mardikian and he

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conferred with the mayor."

"Yes?"

"And they fired me. They think I'm crazy. Mardikian checked with Sudakis, who said he didn't have any intention of quitting, and Mardikian said he and the mayor were worried about my wild crystal-ball predictions, they wanted me to go back to straight projective stuff, so I told them about *seeing*. I didn't mention you. I said I was able to do it, and that was where I was getting stuff like the Thibodaux trip and the Sudakis resignation, and Mardikian made me repeat everything to Quinn, and Quinn said it was too dangerous for him to keep a lunatic like me on his staff. He put it more gently than that, though. I'm on leave until June 30, and then I get cut from the city payroll."

"I see," said Carvajal. He didn't sound upset and he didn't sound sympathetic.

"You knew this would happen."

"Did I?"

"You must have. Don't play games with me, Carvajal. Did you know I'd get thrown out if I told the mayor that Sudakis was going to quit in January?"

Carvajal said nothing.

"Did you know or didn't you?"

I was shouting.

"I knew," he said.

"You knew. Of course you knew. You know everything. But you didn't tell me."

"You didn't ask," he replied innocently.

"It didn't occur to me to ask. God knows why, but it didn't. Couldn't you have warned me? Couldn't you have said, Keep a tight lip, you're in worse trouble than you suspect, you're going to get tossed out on your ass if you aren't careful?"

"How can you ask such a question this late in the game, Lew?"

"You were willing to sit back calmly and let my career be destroyed?"

"Think carefully," Carvajal said. "I knew you'd be dismissed, yes. Just as I know Sudakis will resign. But what could I do about it? To me your dismissal has already happened, remember. It isn't subject to prevention."

"Oh, Jesus! Conservation of reality again?"

"Of course. Really, Lew, do you think I'd warn you against anything that might seem to be in your power to change? How futile that would be! How foolish! We don't change things, do we?"

"No, we don't," I said bitterly. "We stand off to one side and politely let them happen. If necessary we *help* them happen. Even if it involves the destruction of a career, even if it involves the ruination of an attempt to stabilize

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the political fortunes of this miserable misgoverned country by guiding into the presidency a man who — oh, Jesus, Carvajal, you led me right into this, didn't you? You set me up for the whole thing. And you don't give a damn. Isn't that so? You simply don't give a damn!"

"There are worse things than losing a job, Lew."

"But everything I was building, everything I was trying to shape — how in God's name am I going to help Quinn now? What am I going to do? You've broken me!"

"What has happened is what had to happen," he said.

"Damn you and your pious acceptance!"

"I thought you had come to share that acceptance."

"I don't share anything," I told him. "I was out of my mind ever to get involved with you, Carvajal. Because of you I've lost Sundara, I've lost my place at Quinn's side, I've lost my health and my reason, I've lost everything that mattered to me, and for what? *For what?* For one stinking squint into the future that may have been nothing but a quick fatigue-high? For a head full of morbid fatalistic philosophy and half-baked theories about the flow of time? Christ! Christ! I wish I'd never heard of you! You know what you are, Carvajal? You're a kind of vampire, some sort of bloodsucker, pulling energy and vitality out of me, using me to support your strength as you drift along toward the end of your own useless, sterile, motiveless, pointless life."

Carvajal didn't seem at all moved. "I'm sorry to hear you so disturbed, Lew," he said mildly.

"What else are you concealing from me? Come on, give me all the bad news. Do I slip on the ice at Christmas and break my back? Do I use up my savings and get shot holding up a bank? Am I going to become a sniffer addict next? Come on, tell me what's heading toward me now!"

"Please, Lew."

"Tell me!"

"You ought to try to calm down."

"Tell me!"

"I'm holding nothing back. You won't have an eventful winter. It's going to be a time of transition for you, of meditation and inner change, without any dramatic external events. And then — and then — I can't tell you any more, Lew. You know I can't *see* beyond this coming spring."

Those last few words hit me like a knee in the belly. Of course. Of course! Carvajal was going to die. A man who would do nothing to prevent his own death wasn't going to interfere while someone else, even his only friend, marched

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serenely on toward catastrophe. He might even nudge that friend down the slippery slope if he felt a nudge was appropriate. It was naive of me to have thought Carvajal would ever have done anything to protect me from harm, once he had *seen* the harm coming. The man was bad news. And the man had set me up for disaster.

I said, "Any deal that may have existed between us is off. I'm afraid of you. I don't want anything more to do with you, Carvajal. You won't hear from me again."

He was silent. Perhaps he was laughing quietly. Almost certainly he was laughing quietly.

His silence sapped the melodramatic force from my little parting speech. "Good-bye," I said, feeling silly, and hung up with a crash.

36.

Now winter closed upon the city. Some years no snow comes until January or even February, but we had a white Thanksgiving, and in the early weeks of December there was blizzard after blizzard, until it seemed that all life in New York would be crushed in the grip of a new ice age. The city has sophisticated snow-removal equipment, heating cables buried in the streets, sanitation trucks with melt tanks, an armada of scoops and catchments and scrapers and skimmers, but no gadgetry could cope with a season that dropped ten centimeters of snow on Wednesday, a dozen more on Friday, fifteen on Monday, half a meter on Saturday. Occasionally we had a thaw between storms, allowing the top of the accumulated pack of soften and slush to drip into the gutters, but then came the cold again, the killing cold, and what had melted turned quickly to knife-edged ice. All activities halted in the frozen city. A weird silence prevailed. I stayed indoors; so did anyone else who had no powerful reason for going out. The year 1999, the whole twentieth century, seemed to be taking leave in frigid stealth.

In this bleak time I had virtually no contact with anyone except Bob Lombroso. The financier phoned, five or six days after my dismissal, to express his regrets. "But why," he wanted to know, "did you ever decide to tell Mardikian the real story?"

"I felt I had no choice. He and Quinn had stopped taking me seriously."

"And they'd take you more seriously if you claimed to be able to see the future?"

"I gambled. I lost."

"For a man who's always had such a superb sixth sense of intuition, Lew, you handled the

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situation in a strikingly dumb way."

"I know. I know. I suppose I thought Mardikian had a more resilient imagination. Maybe I overestimated Quinn too."

"Haig didn't get where he is today by having a resilient imagination," Lombroso said. "As for the mayor, he's playing for big stakes and he doesn't feel like taking any unnecessary risks."

"I'm a necessary risk, Bob. I can help him."

"If you have any notion of persuading him to take you back, forget it. Quinn's terrified of you."

"Terrified?"

"Well, maybe that's too strong a word. But you make him profoundly uncomfortable. He half suspects that you might actually be able to do the things you claim. I think that's what scares him."

"That he may have fired an authentic seer?"

"No, that authentic seers exist at all. He said — and this is absolutely confidential, Lew, it'll do me harm if he finds out you've heard this — he said that the idea that people might really be capable of seeing the future oppresses him like a hand around his throat. That it makes him feel paranoid, that it limits his options, that it makes the horizon close in around him. Those are his phrases. He hates the entire concept of determinism; he believes he's a man who's always been the shaper of his own destinies, and he feels a kind of existential terror when faced with somebody who maintains that the future is a fixed record, a book that can be opened and read. Because that turns him into a sort of puppet following a preordained pattern. It takes a lot to push Paul Quinn into paranoia, but I think you've succeeded. And what bothers him particularly is that he hired you, he made you a member of his inner team, he kept you close by him for four years, without realizing what a threat you were to him."

"I've never been a threat to him, Bob."

"He sees it differently."

"He's wrong. For one thing, the future *hasn't* been an open book to me all the years I've been with him. I worked by means of stochastic processes until quite recently, until I got entangled with Carvajal. You know that."

"But Quinn doesn't."

"What of it? It's absured for him to feel threatened by me. Look, my feelings about Quinn have always been a mingling of awe and admiration and respect and, well, love. Love. Even now. I still think he's a great human being and a great political leader, and I want to see him become President, and though I wish he hadn't panicked

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over me, I don't resent it at all. I can see how from his viewpoint it might have seemed necessary to get rid of me. But I *still* want to do all I can for him."

"He won't take you back, Lew."

"Okay. I accept that. But I can still work for him without his knowing it."

"How?"

"Through you," I said. "I can pass suggestions along to you and you can convey them to Quinn as though you've thought of them yourself."

"If I come to him with the sort of things you've been bringing him," Lombroso said, "he'll get rid of me as fast as he got rid of you. Maybe faster."

"They won't be the same sort, Bob. For one thing, I know now what's too risky to tell him. For another, I don't have my source any more. I've broken with Carvajal. You know, he never warned me I was going to get fired? Sudakis' future he tells me about, but not my own. I think he *wanted* me to get fired. Carvajal's been nothing but grief to me, and I'm not going back for more of the same. But I still have my own intuitive processes to offer, my stochastic knack. I can analyze trends and generalize strategies, and I can relay my insights to you, can't I? Can't I? We'll fix it so Quinn and Mardikian never find out that you and I are in contact. You can't just let me go to waste, Bob. Not while there's still a job to do for Quinn. Well?"

"We can try," said Lombroso warily. "I suppose we can give it a try, yes. All right. I'll be your mouthpiece, Lew. Provided you allow me the option of deciding what I want to pass along to Quinn and what I don't. It's my neck on the block now, remember, not yours."

"Sure," I told him.

If I couldn't serve Quinn myself, I could do it by proxy. For the first time since my dismissal I felt alive and hopeful. It didn't even snow that night.

37.

But the proxy arrangement didn't work out. We tried, and we failed. I diligently sat down with the newspaper and caught up with current developments — one week out of touch and I had lost track of half a dozen emerging patterns — and then I made the perilous frosty journey across town to the Lew Nichols Associates office, still a going concern though ticking but feebly, and ran off some projections on my machinery. I transmitted the results to Bob Lombroso by courier, not wanting to chance the telephone. What I gave him was no

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big deal, a couple of piffling suggestions about city labor policy. During the next few days I generated a few more equally tame ideas. Then Lombroso called and said, "You might as well stop. Mardikian shot us down."

"What happened?"

"I've been feeding your stuff in, you know, a bit at a time. Then last night I had dinner with Haig, and when we reached the dessert, he suddenly asked me if you and I were keeping in touch."

"And you told him the truth?"

"I tried not to tell him anything," Lombroso said. "Haig's pretty sharp, you know. He saw right through me. He said, 'You're getting this stuff from Lew, aren't you?' And I shrugged and he laughed and said, 'I know you are. It's got his touch all over it.' I didn't admit anything. Very amiably Haig told me to cut it out, that I'd be jeopardizing my own position with Quinn if the mayor started to suspect what was going on."

"Then Quinn doesn't know yet?"

"Apparently not. And Mardikian isn't planning to tip him off. But I can't take any chances. If Quinn gets wise to me, I'm through. He goes into absolute paranoia whenever anyone mentions the name of Lew Nichols around him."

"It's that bad, is it?"

"It's that bad."

"So I've become the enemy now," I said.

"I'm afraid you have. I'm sorry, Lew."

"So am I," I said, sighing.

"I won't be calling you. If you need to get in touch with me, do it by way of my Wall Street office."

"Okay. I don't want to get you in trouble, Bob."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"Okay."

"If I could do anything for you—"

"Okay, Okay. Okay."

36.

There was a foul storm two days before Christmas, a mean reptilian blizzard, fierce brutal winds and sub-Arctic temperatures and a heavy fall of dry, hard, rough snow. It was the sort of storm that would depress a Minnesotan and make an Eskimo cry. All day long my windows shivered in their venerable frames as cascades of wind-driven snow pounded them like clusters of pebbles, and I shivered with them, thinking that we still had all the misery of January and February to come, and snow not implausible in March either. I went to bed early and woke up early into a dazzling sunny morning. Cold sunny days are

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common after snowstorms, as clear dry air moves in, but there was something odd about the quality of the light, which was not the harsh brittle lemon hue of a winter day but rather the sweet mellow gold of spring; and, turning the radio on, I heard the announcer talking about the dramatic shift in the weather. Apparently some vagrant air mass out of the Carolinas had moved north during the night, and the temperature had risen to improbable late-April warmth.

And April remained with us. Day after day the unseasonable heat caressed the winter-weary city. Of course everything was a mess at first, as the great hummocks of recent snow softened and melted and ran in furious rivers along the gutters; but by the middle of the holiday week the worst of the slush was gone. A wave of giddiness swept New York: topcoats and snow robes disappeared, the streets were crowded with smiling buoyant people in light tunics and jerkins, throngs of nude and seminude sunbathers, pale but eager, sprawled on the sunny embankments of Central Park, every fountain in midtown had its full complement of musicians and jugglers and dancers. The carnival atmosphere intensified as the old year ticked away and the startling weather lingered, for this was 1999 and what was ebbing was not only a year but an entire millennium. (Those who insisted that the twenty-first century and the third millennium would not properly begin until January 1, 2001 were regarded as spoilsports and pedants.) The coming of April in December unhinged everyone. The unnatural mildness of the weather following so soon on the unnatural cold, the mysterious brightness of the sun hanging low on the southern horizon, the weird soft springlike texture of the air, gave a bizarre apocalyptic flavor to these days, so that anything seemed possible and it would not have been a surprise to behold strange comets in the night sky, or violent shifts in the constellations. I imagine it was something like that in Rome just before the arrival of the Goths, or in Paris on the verge of the Terror. It was a joyous but obscurely disturbing and frightening week; we relished the miraculous warmth, but we took it also as an omen, a portent, of some somber confrontation yet to come. As the final day of December approached, there was an odd, perceptible heightening of tension. What we felt was the desperate gaiety of tightrope walkers dancing over a fathomless abyss. There were those who said, taking a cruel pleasure in the grim prediction,

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that New Year's Eve would be blighted by sudden vast snow, by tidal waves or tornadoes, despite the weather bureau's forecast of continued balminess. But the day was bright and sweet, like the seven days preceding it. By noon, we learned, it was already the warmest December 31 since such records had been kept in New York City, and the mercury continued to climb all afternoon, so that we passed from pseudo-April into a perplexing imitation of June.

During this whole time I had kept to myself, shrouded in murky confusions and, I suppose, self-pity. I called no one — not Lombroso nor Sundara nor Mardikian nor Carvajal nor any of the other shreds and fragments of my former existence. I did go out for a few hours each day to roam the streets — who could resist that sun? — but I spoke to nobody, and I discouraged people from speaking to me, and by evening I was home, alone, to read a bit, drink some brandy, listen to music without really listening, go early to bed. My isolation seemed to deprive me of all stochastic grace: I lived entirely in the present, like an animal, with no notion of what might happen next, no hunches, none of the old sense of patterns gathering and meshing.

On New Year's Eve I felt a need to be outdoors. To barricade myself in solitude on such a night was intolerable, the eve of, among other things, my 34th birthday. I thought of phoning friends, but, no, the social energies had deserted me: I would slink solitary and unknown through the byways of Manhattan, like the Caliph Haroun al-Raschid touring Baghdad. But I dressed in my nippy-dip peacock best, summer clothes of scarlet and gold with glistening underthreads, and I trimmed my beard and scraped my scalp, and I went out jauntily to see the century into its tomb.

Darkness had come by late afternoon — this was still the depth of winter, no matter what the thermometer told us — and the lights of the city glittered. Though it was only seven o'clock, the partying evidently was beginning early; I head singing, distant laughter, the sounds of chanting, the far-off crash of breaking glass. I had a meager dinner in a small automated restaurant on Third Avenue and walked aimlessly westward and southward, discovering, after an hour or so, that I was heading toward Times Square.

Ordinarily one didn't stroll like this in Manhattan after dark. But tonight the streets were as busy as they were by day, pedestrians everywhere, laughing, peering into shop windows, waving to strangers, jostling one another playfully, and

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I felt safe. Was this truly New York, the city of closed faces and wary eyes, the city of knives that gleamed on dark sullen streets? Yes, yes, yes, New York, but a New York transformed, a millennial New York, New York on the night of the climactic Saturnalia.

Saturnalia, yes, that was what it was, a lunatic revel, a frenzy of ecstatic spirits. Every drug in the psychedelic pharmacopoeia was being peddled on street corners, and sales seemed brisk. No one walked a straight line. Sirens wailed everywhere, as the gaiety mounted in pitch. I took no drugs myself except the ancient one, alcohol, which I took most copiously, stopping in tavern after tavern, a beer here, a shot of awful brandy there, some tequila, some rum, a martini, even dark rich sherry.

There were definite increments of wildness from hour to hour. In the bars nudity was still uncommon by nine, but by half past there was bare sweaty flesh everywhere, jiggling breasts, waggling buttocks, clap hands and kick, everyone join in a circle. It was half past nine before I saw anyone screwing in the streets, but outdoor fornication was widespread by ten. An undercurrent of violence had been present all evening — smashing of windows, shooting out of street-lamps — but it picked up strength rapidly after ten: there were fistfights, some genial, some murderous, and at the corner of 57th and Fifth there was a mob battle going on, a hundred men and women clubbing at each other in what looked like a random way, and motorists were having noisy disputes everywhere, and it seemed to me that some drivers were deliberately ramming their cars into others for the sheer destructive fun of it. Were there murders? Most certainly. Rapes? By the thousand. Mutilations and other monstrosities? I have no doubt.

And where were the police? I saw them, now and then, some trying desperately to hold back the tide of disorder, others giving in and joining it, policemen with flushed faces and glazed eyes happily wading into fights and escalating them to savage warfare, policemen buying drugs from the corner peddlers, policemen stripped to the waist groping naked girls in bars, policemen raucously smashing windshields with their nightsticks. The general craziness was contagious. After a week of apocalyptic build-up, a week of grotesque tension, no one could hold too tightly to his sanity.

Midnight found me in Times Square. The old custom, long since abandoned by a city in decay: thousands, hundreds of thousands, crammed shoulder to shoulder

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between 46th and 42nd Streets, singing, shouting, kissing, swaying. Suddenly the hour struck. Startling searchlights speared the sky. The summits of office towers turned radiant with brilliant floodlights. The year 2000! The year 2000! And my birthday had come! Happy birthday! Happy, happy, happy.

I was drunk. I was out of my mind. The universal hysteria raged in me. I found my hands grasping someone's breasts, and squeezed, and jammed a mouth against a mouth, and felt a hot moist body pressed tight to mine. The crowd surged, and we were swept apart, and I moved on the human tide, hugging, laughing, fighting to catch my breath, leaping, falling, stumbling, nearly going down beneath a thousand pairs of feet.

"There's a fire!" someone yelled, and indeed flames were dancing high on a building to the west along 44th Street. Such a lovely orange hue — we began to cheer and applaud. We are all Nero tonight, I thought, and was swept onward, southward. I could no longer see the flames, but the smell of smoke was spreading through the area. Bells tolled. More sirens. Chaos, chaos, chaos.

And then I felt a sensation as of a fist pounding the back of my head and dropped to my knees in an open space, dazed, and covered my face with my hands to ward off the next blow, but there was no next blow, only a flood of visions. Visions. A baffling torrent of images roared through my mind. I saw myself old and frayed, coughing in a hospital bed with a shining spidery lattice of medical machinery all about me; I saw myself swimming in a clear mountain pool; I saw myself battered and heaved by surf on some angry tropical shore. I peered into the mysterious interior of some vast incomprehensible crystalline mechanism. I stood at the edge of a field of lava, watching molten matter bubble and pop as on the Earth's first morning. Colors assailed me. Voices whispered to me, speaking in fragments, in pulverized bits of words and tag-ends of phrases. This is a trip, I told myself, a trip, a trip, a very bad trip, but even the worst trip ends eventually, and I crouched, trembling, trying not to resist, letting the nightmare sweep through me and play itself out. It may have gone on for hours; it may have lasted only a minute. In one moment of clarity I said to myself, This is *seeing*, this is how it begins, like a fever, like a madness. I remember telling myself that.

I remember vomiting, too, casting forth the evening's mixture of liquors in quick heavy tremors, and huddling afterward near my

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own stinking pool, weak, shaking, unable to rise. And then came thunder, like the anger of Zeus, majestic and unanswerable. There was a great stillness after that one terrifying thunderclap. All over the city the Saturnalia was halting as New Yorkers stopped, stiffened, turned their eyes in wonder and awe to the skies. What now? Thunder on a winter night? Would the earth open and swallow us all? Would the sea rise and make an Atlantis of our playground? There came a second clap of thunder minutes after the first, but no lightning, and then, after another pause, a third, and then came rain, gentle at first, torrential in a few moments, a warm spring rain to welcome us to the year 2000. I rose uncertainly to my feet and, having remained chastely clothed all evening, stripped now, naked on Broadway at 41st Street, feet flat on the pavement, head upturned, letting the downpour wash the sweat and tears and weariness from me, letting it sluice my mouth to rinse me of the foul taste of vomit. It was a wondrous moment. But quickly I felt chilled. April was over; December was returning. My sex shriveled and my shoulders sagged. Shivering, I fumbled for my sodden clothes; and, sober now, drenched, miserable, timid, imagining brigands and cutpurses lurking in every alley, I began the long, slow shuffle across town. The temperature seemed to plummet five degrees for every ten blocks I traversed; by the time I reached the East Side I felt I was freezing, and as I crossed 57th Street I noticed the rain had turned to snow, and the snow was sticking, making a fine powdery dusting that covered streets and automobiles and the slumped bodies of the unconscious and the dead. It was snowing with full wintry malevolence when I reached my apartment. The time was five in the morning, January 1, 2000 A.D. I dropped my clothing on the floor and fell naked into bed, quivering, sore, and I pressed my knees to my chest and huddled there, half expecting to die before dawn. Fourteen hours passed before I awoke.

39.

What a morning after! Not until night was beginning to fall, that first of January, was the full impact of the previous night's wild events apparent, how many hundreds of citizens had perished in violence or in foolish misadventure or of mere exposure, how many shops had been looted, how many public monuments vandalized, how many wallets lifted, how many unwilling bodies violated. Had any city known a night like that since

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the sack of Byzantium? The populace had gone berserk, and no one had tried to restrain the fury, no one, not even the police. The first scattered reports had it that most of the officers of the law had joined the fun, and as detailed investigations proceeded throughout the day, it turned out that that had in fact been the case: in the contagion of the moment the men in blue had often led rather than contained the chaos. On the late news came word that Police Commissioner Sudakis, taking personal responsibility for the debacle, had resigned. I saw him on the screen, face rigid, eyes reddened, his fury barely under control; he spoke raggedly of the shame he felt, the disgrace, he talked of the breakdown of morality, even of the decline of urban civilization; he looked like a man who had had no sleep for a week, a pitiful shattered embarrassment of a man, mumbling and coughing, and I prayed silently for the television people to have done with him and go elsewhere. Sudakis' resignation was my own vindication, but I could take little pleasure in it, not while that sad ravaged face looked out of the screen at me. At last the scene shifted; we saw the rubble of a five-block area in Brooklyn that had been allowed to burn by absent-minded firemen. Yes, yes, Sudakis has resigned. Of course. Reality is conserved: Carvajal's infallibility is once more confirmed.

I waited a few days, while the city slowly returned to normal; then I phoned Lombroso at his Wall Street office. He wasn't there, of course. I told the answering-machine to program a return call at his earliest convenience. All high city officials were with the mayor at Gracie Mansion virtually on a round-the-clock basis. Fires in every borough had left thousands homeless; the hospitals were stacked three tiers deep with victims of violence and accident; damage claims against the city, mainly for failure to provide proper police protection, were already in the billions and mounting hourly. Then, too, there was the damage to the city's public image to deal with. Since entering office Quinn had painstakingly tried to restore the reputation New York had had in the middle of the twentieth century, as the nation's most exciting, vital, stimulating city, the true capital of the planet and the center of all that was interesting, a city that was thrilling but yet safe for visitors. All that had been ruined in one orgiastic night more in keeping with the nation's familiar view of New York as a brutal, insane, ferocious, filthy zoo. So I heard nothing from Lombroso until the middle of

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January, when things were fairly quiet again, and by the time he called I had given up hearing from him at all.

He told me what was going on at City Hall: the mayor was preparing a sheaf of drastic, almost Gottfriedesque, measures to maintain public order. The police shake-up would be accelerated; drug traffic would be restricted almost as severely as it had been before the liberalizations of the 1980's; an early-warning system would be put into effect to head off civic disturbances involving more than two dozen people, et cetera, et cetera. It sounded wrong-headed to me, a rash, panicky response to a unique event, but my advice was no longer welcome, and I kept my thoughts to myself.

"What about Sudakis?" I asked.

"He's definitely out. Quinn refused his resignation and spent three full days trying to persuade him to stay, but Sudakis regards himself as permanently discredited here by the stuff his men did that night. He's taken some small-town job in western Pennsylvania and he's already gone."

"I don't mean that. I mean, has the accuracy of my prediction about Sudakis had any effect on Quinn's attitude toward me?"

"Yes," Lombroso said.

"Is he reconsidering?"

"He thinks you're a sorcerer. He thinks you may have sold your soul to the devil. Literally. Literally. Underneath all the sophistication, he's still an Irish Catholic, don't forget. In times of stress it surfaces in him. Around City Hall you've become an Antichrist, Lew."

"Has he gone so crazy that he can't see it might be useful to have somebody around who can tip him to things like the Sudakis resignation?"

"No hope, Lew. Forget about working for Quinn. Put it absolutely out of your mind. Don't think about him, don't write letters to him, don't try to call him, don't have anything to do with him. You might look into the idea of leaving the city, in fact."

"Jesus. Why?"

"For your own good."

"What's that supposed to mean? Bob, are you trying to tell me I'm in *danger* from Quinn?"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything," he said, sounding nervous.

"Whatever you are doing, I'm not having any. I won't believe Quinn's as afraid of me as you think, and I completely refuse to believe he might take some sort of action against me. It isn't credible. I know the man. I was practically his alter ego for four years. I—"

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"Listen, Lew," Lombroso said, "I've got to get off the line. You can't imagine how much work is stacking up here."

"All right. Thanks for returning my call."

"And — Lew —"

"Yes?"

"It might be a good idea for you not to call me. Not even at the Wall Street number. Except in case of some dire emergency, of course. My own position with Quinn has been a little delicate ever since we tried to work that proxy deal, and now — and now — well, you understand, don't you? I'm sure you understand."

40.

I understood. I have spared Lombroso the perils of further telephone calls from me. Eleven months, nearly, have passed since the day of that conversation, and in that time I haven't spoken to him at all, not a word to the man who was my closest friend during my years in the Quinn administration. Nor have I had any contact, direct or otherwise, with Quinn himself.

41.

In February the visions began. There had been one harbinger on the cliff at Big Sur and another in Times Square on New Year's Eve, but now they became a routine part of my daily life. *None can pierce the vast black veil uncertain,* the poet said, *Because there is no light behind the curtain.* Oh, but the light, the light, the light, the light is there! And it lit my winter days. At first the visions came over me no more often than once every twenty-four hours, and they came unasked, like epileptic fits, usually in the late afternoon or just before midnight, signaling themselves with a glow at the back of my skull, a warmth, a tickling that would not go away. But soon I understood the techniques for invoking them, and I could summon them at will. Even then, I was able to *see* at most once a day, with a prolonged period of recuperation required afterward. Within a few weeks, though, I became capable of entering the *seeing* state more readily — two or even three times a day — as if the power were a muscle that thrived with use. Eventually the interval of recuperation became minimal. Now I can turn the gift on every fifteen minutes, if I feel like it. Once, experimentally, toward the early part of March, I tried it, on-off on-off constantly for several hours, tiring myself but not diminishing the intensity of what I *saw.*

If I don't evoke the visions at least once a day, they come to me

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anyway, breaking through of their own accord, pouring unbidden into my mind.

42.

I *see* a small red-shingled house on a country lane. The trees are in full leaf, dark green; it must be late summer. I stand by the front gate. My hair is still short and stubbly but growing in; this scene must lie not very far in the future, probably this very year. Two young men are with me, one dark-haired and slight, the other a burly red-haired one. I have no idea who they are, but the self I *see* is relaxed and easy with them, as if they are intimate companions. So they are close friends that I am yet to meet. I *see* myself taking a key from my pocket. "Let me show you the place," I say. "I think it's about what we need as the headquarters for the Center."

Snow is falling. The automobiles in the streets are bullet-shaped, snub-nosed, very small, very strange to me. Overhead a kind of helicopter soars. Three paddlelike projections dangle from it, and there are loudspeakers, apparently, at the tip of each paddle. From the three speakers in unison comes a wistful bleating sound, high-pitched and gentle, emitted for a period of perhaps two seconds spaced by five-second spans of silence. The rhythm is perfectly steady, each mild bleep arriving on schedule and cutting effortlessly through the dense swirls of descending flakes. The helicopter flies slowly up Fifth Avenue at an altitude of less than 500 meters, and as it makes its bleating way northward, the snow melts below its path, clearing a zone exactly as wide as the avenue.

Sundara and I meet for cocktails at a glittering lounge hanging like the gardens of Nebuchadnezzar from the summit of some gigantic tower looming over Los Angeles. I assume it's Los Angeles because I can make out the feathery shapes of palm trees lining the streets far beneath the window, and the architecture of the surrounding buildings is distinctively southern Californian, and through the twilight haze there is a hint of a vast ocean not far to the west and mountains to the north. I have no idea what I'm doing in California nor how I come to be seeing Sundara there; it's plausible that she has returned to her native city to live, and I, visiting on business, have promoted a reunion. We have both changed. Her hair is streaked now with white, and her face seems leaner, less voluptuous; her eye sparkle as before, but the gleam in them is the

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glint of hard-won knowledge, and not just playfulness. I am long-haired, graying, dressed with chaste ferocity in an unadorned black tunic; I look about 45, and I strike myself as crisp, taut, impressive, a commanding executive type, so self-possessed that I awe myself. Are there signs about my eyes of that tragic exhaustion, that burned-out devastation, that had marked Carvajal after so many years of *seeing?* I don't think so, but perhaps my second sight is not yet intense enough to register such subjective details. Sundara wears no wedding ring, nor are there any of the insignia of Transit visible about her. My watching self longs to ask a thousand questions. I want to know whether there has been a reconciliation, whether we see each other often, whether we are lovers, even whether perhaps we are living together again. But I have no voice; I am unable to speak through the lips of my future self; it is altogether impossible for me to direct or modify his actions; I can merely observe. He and Sundara order drinks; they clink glasses; they smile; they exchange trivial chatter about the sunset, the weather, the decor of the cocktail lounge. Then the scene slips away and I have learned nothing.

Soldiers move through the canyons of New York, five abreast, looking warily to all sides. I watch them from an upper-story window. They wear bizarre uniforms, green with red piping, gaudy yellow-and-red berets, ruffles at their shoulders. They are armed with weapons that look a little like crossbows — sturdy metal tubes about a meter in length, widening to a fan at the outer end and bristling with lateral whiskers of bright wire coil — which they carry with the wide ends balanced across their left forearms. The self who watches them is a man of at least 60, white-haired, gaunt, with deep vertical lines scored in his cheeks; he is recognizably myself, and yet he is almost wholly strange to me. In the street a figure erupts from a building and rushes wildly toward the soldiers, shouting slogans, waving his arms. One very young soldier jerks his right arm up, and a cone of green light emerges quietly from his weapon; the onrushing figure halts, incandescent, and disappears. Disappears.

The self I *see* is still youthful, but older than I am now. Say, 40: then this would be about the year 2006. He lies on a rumpled bed next to an attractive young woman with long black hair; they are both naked, sweaty, disheveled; obviously they have been making love. He asks, "Did you hear the President's speech last night?"

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"Why should I waste my time listening to that murderous fascist bastard?" she replies.

A party is going on. Shrill unfamiliar music, strange golden wine poured freely from double-spouted bottles. The air is dense with blue fumes. I hold court at one corner of the crowded room, talking urgently with a plump, freckle-faced young woman and one of the young men who had been with me at that red-shingled house. But my voice is covered by the raucous music, and I perceive only shreds and scraps of what I am saying; I pick up words like "miscalculation" and "overload" and "demonstration" and "alternative distribution," but they are embedded in gibberish, and it is all ultimately unintelligible. The clothing styles are odd, loose irregular garments decked with patches and strips of mismatched fabrics. In the middle of the room about twenty of the guests are dancing with weird intensity, milling in a ragged circle, slashing the air fiercely with elbows and knees. They are nude; they have coated their bodies entirely with a glassy purple dye; they are altogether hairless, both men and women totally depilated from head to foot, so that but for their jiggling genitals and bobbing breats they might easily pass for plastic mannequins jolted into a twitching, spasmodic counterfeit of life.

A humid summer night. A dull booming sound, another, another. Fireworks explode against the blackness of the sky over the Hudson's Jersey shore. Skyrockets litter the heavens with Chinese fire, red, yellow, green, blue, dazzling streaks and starbursts, cycle upon cycle of flaming beauty accompanied by terrifying hisses and pops and roars and bangs, climax after climax; and then, just as one assumes the splendor now will die away into silence and darkness, there comes an amazing final pyrotechnical frenzy, culminating in a grand double set-piece: an American flag, spectacularly quivering above us with every star discernible, and, exploding out of the center of Old Glory's field, the image of a man's face, limned in startlingly realistic flesh tones. The face is the face of Paul Quinn.

I am aboard a great airplane, a plane whose wings seem to stretch from China to Peru, and through the porthole beside me I see a vast gray-blue sea on whose bosom the reflected sun shines in a furious glaring brightness. I am strapped down, awaiting landing, and now I can make out our destination: an enormous hexagonal platform rising steeply from the sea, an

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artificial island, as symmetrical in its angles as a snowflake, a concrete island encrusted with squat red-brick buildings and split down its middle by the long white arrow of an airstrip, an island that is entirely alone in this immense sea with thousands of kilometers of emptiness bordering each of its six sides.

Manhattan. Autumn, chilly, the sky dark, the windows overhead glowing. Before me a colossal tower, rising just east of the venerable Fifth Avenue library. "The tallest in the world," someone says behind me, one tourist to another, twanging western accent. Indeed it must be. The tower fills the sky. "It's all government offices," the westerner goes on. "Can you catch it? Two hundred floors high, and all government offices. With a palace for Quinn right at the top, so they say. For whenever he comes to town. A goddamned palace, like for a king."

What I particularly fear, as these visions crowd upon me, is my first confrontation with the scene of my own death. Will I be destroyed by it, I wonder, as Carvajal was destroyed — all drive and purpose sucked from me by one glimpse of my last moments? I wait, wondering when it will come, dreading it and eager for it, wanting to absorb the terrifying knowledge and be done with it; and when it does come, it's an anticlimax, a comic letdown. What I *see* is a faded, weary old man in a hospital bed, gaunt and worn, perhaps 75 years old, maybe 80, even 90. He is surrounded by a bright cocoon of life-support apparatus; needled arms arch and weave about him like the tails of scorpions, filling him with enzymes, hormones, decongestants, stimulants, whatever. I've seen him before, briefly, that drunken night in Times Square, when I crouched, dazzled and astounded, tripping out on a torrent of voices and images, but now the vision continues a little further than that other time, so that I perceive this future me not merely as a sick old man but as a dying old man, on his way out, sliding away, sliding away, the whole vast wonderful lattice of medical equipment unable any longer to sustain the feeble beat of life. I can feel the pulse ebbing in him. Quietly, quietly, he is going. Into the darkness. Into the peace. He is very still. Not yet dead, else my perceptions of him would cease. But almost. Almost. And now. No more data. Peace and silence. A good death, yes.

Is that all? Is he truly dead, out there fifty or sixty years from now,

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or has the vision merely been interrupted? I can't be sure. If only I could *see* beyond that moment of quietus, just a glimpse past the curtain, to watch the routines of death, the expressionless orderlies placidly disconnecting the life-support system, the sheet pulled up over the face, the cadaver wheeled off to the morgue. But there is no way to pursue the image. The picture-show ends with the last flicker of light. Yet I am certain that this is it. I am relieved and almost a bit disappointed. So little? Just to fade away at a great old age? Nothing to dread in that. I think of Carvajal, crazy-eyed from having seen himself die too often. But I'm not Carvajal. How can such knowledge harm me? I admit the inevitability of my death; the details are mere footnotes. The scene recurs, a few weeks later, and then again, and again. Always the same. The hospital, the spidery maze of life-support stuff, the sliding, the darkness, the peace. So there is nothing to fear from *seeing*. I've seen the worst, and it hasn't harmed me.

But then all is cast into doubt, and my newfound confidence is shattered. I *see* myself again in that great plane, and we are swooping toward the hexagonal artifical island. A cabin attendant rushes up the aisle, distraught, alarmed, and behind her comes a bellying oily burst of black smoke. Fire on board! The plane's wings dip wildly. There are screams. Unintelligible cries over the public-address system. Muffled, incoherent instructions. Pressure nails my body to my seat; we are plunging toward the ocean. Down, down, and we hit, an incredible cracking impact, the ship is ripped apart; still strapped in, I plummet face-first into the cold dark depths. The sea swallows me and I know no more.

The soldiers move in sinister columns through the streets. They pause outside the building where I live; they confer; then a detachment bursts into the house. I hear them on the stairs. No use trying to hide. They throw open the door, shouting my name. I greet them, hands raised. I smile and tell them I'll go peacefully. But then — who knows why? — one of them, a very young one, in fact only a boy, swings suddenly around, aiming his crossbowlike weapon at me. I have time only to gasp. Then the green radiance comes, and darkness afterward.

"This is the one!" someone yells, raising a club high above my head and bringing it down with terrible force.

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Sundara and I watch nightfall engulf the Pacific. The lights of Santa Monica sparkle before us. Tentatively, timidly, I cover her hand with mine. And in that moment I feel a stabbing pain in my chest, I crumple, I topple, I kick frantically, knocking the table over, I pound my fists against the thick carpet, I struggle to hold onto life. There is the taste of blood in my mouth. I fight to live, and I lose.

I stand on a parapet eighty stories above Broadway. With a quick, easy motion I push myself outward into the cool spring air. I float, I make graceful swimming gestures with my arms, I dive serenely toward the pavement.

"Look out!" a woman close beside me cries. "He's got a bomb!"

The surf is rough today. Gray waves rise and crash, rise and crash. Yet I wade out; I force my way through the breakers; I swim with lunatic dedication toward the horizon, cleaving the bleak sea as though out to set an endurance record, swimming on and on despite the throbbing in my temples and the pounding at the base of my throat; and the sea grows more tempestuous, its surface heaving and swelling even out here, so far from shore. The water hits me in the face, and I go under, choking, and battle my way to the surface, and I am hit again, again, again....

"This is the one!" someone yells.

I *see* myself again in that great plane, and we are swooping toward the hexagonal artificial island.

"Look out!" a woman close beside me cries.

The soldiers move in sinister columns through the streets. They pause outside the building where I live.

The surf is rough today. Gray waves rise and crash, rise and crash. Yet I wade out, I force my way through the breakers, I swim with lunatic dedication toward the horizon.

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Sundara and I watch nightfall engulf the Pacific. The lights of Santa Monica sparkle before us.

I stand on a parapet eighty stories above Broadway. With a quick, easy motion I push myself outward into the cool spring air.

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"This is the one!" someone yells.

And so. Death, again and again, coming to me in many forms. The scenes recurring, unvarying, contradicting and nullifying one another. Which is the true vision? What of that old man, fading peacefully in his hospital bed? What am I to believe? I am dizzied with an overload of data; I stumble about in a schizophrenic fever, *seeing* more than I can comprehend, integrating nothing, and constantly my pulsating brain drenches me with scenes and images. I am coming apart. I huddle on the floor next to my bed, trembling, waiting for new confusions to seize me. How shall I perish next? The torturer's rack. A plague of botulism? A knife in a dark alleyway? What does all this mean? What's happening to me? I need help. Desperate, terrified, I rush to see Carvajal.

43.

It was months since I had last seen him, half a year; from late November to late April, and he had evidently been through some changes. He looked smaller, almost doll-like, all surplus pared away, the skin drawn back tightly over his cheekbones, his color a peculiar off-yellow, as though he were turning into an elderly Japanese, one of those desiccated little ancients in blue suits and bowties that can sometimes be seen sitting calmly beside the tickers in downtown brokerage houses. There was an unfamiliar Oriental calmness about Carvajal too, an eerie Buddha-tranquillity that seemed to say he had reached a place beyond all storms, a peace that was, happily, contagious: moments after I arrived, full of panic and bewilderment, I felt the charge of tension leaving me.

He waited for me to speak.

How to begin? What to say? I decided to vault completely over our last conversation, putting it away, making no reference to my anger, to my accusations, to my repudiation of him. "I've been seeing," I blurted.

"Yes?" Quizzical, unsurprised, faintly bored.

"Disturbing things."

"Oh?"

He studied me incuriously, waiting, waiting. How placid he was, how self-contained! Like something carved from ivory, beautiful, glossy, immobile.

"Weird scenes. Melodramatic, chaotic, contradictory, bizarre. I don't know what's clairvoyance and what's schizophrenia."

"Contradictory?" he said.

"Sometimes. I can't trust what I *see*."

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"What sort of things?"

"Quinn, for one. He recurs almost daily. Images of Quinn as a tyrant, a dictator, some sort of monster, manipulating the entire nation, not so much a President as a Generalissimo. His face is all over the future. Quinn this, Quinn that, everyone talking about him, everyone afraid of him. It can't be real."

"Whatever you *see* is real."

"No. That's not the real Quinn. That's a paranoid fantasy. I *know* Paul Quinn."

"Do you?" Carvajal asked, his voice reaching me from a distance of fifty thousand light-years.

"Look, I was dedicated to that man. In a real sense I loved that man. And loved what he stood for. Why do I get these visions of him as a dictator? *Why have I become afraid of him?* He isn't like that. I know he isn't."

"Whatever you *see* is real," Carvajal repeated.

"Then there's a Quinn dictatorship coming in this country?"

Carvajal shrugged. "Perhaps. Very likely. How would I know?"

"How would I? How can I believe what I *see?*

Carvajal smiled and held up one hand, palm toward me. "Believe," he urged, in the weary, mocking tone of some old Mexican priest advising a troubled boy to have faith in the goodness of the angels and the charity of the Virgin. "Have no doubts. Believe."

"I can't. There are too many contradictions." I shook my head fiercely. "It isn't just the Quinn visions. I've been *seeing* my own death, too."

"Yes, one must expect that."

"Many times. In many different ways. A plane crash. A suicide. A heart attack. A drowning. And more."

"You find it strange, eh?"

"Strange? I find it absurd. Which one is the reality?"

"They all are."

"That's crazy!"

"There are many levels of reality, Lew."

"They can't all be real. That violates everything you've told me about one fixed and unalterable future."

"There's one future that *must* occur," Carvajal said. "There are many that do not. In the early stages of the *seeing* experience, the mind is unfocused, and reality becomes contaminated with hallucination, and the spirit is bombarded with extraneous data."

"But —"

"Perhaps there are many time-lines," Carvajal said. "one true one, and many potential ones, abortive lines, lines that have their existence only in the gray borderlands of probability. Sometimes information from those

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time-lines crowds in on one, if one's mind is open enough, if it is vulnerable enough. I've experienced that."

"You never said a word about it."

"I didn't want to confuse you, Lew."

"But what do I do? What good is any of the information I'm receiving? How do I distinguish the real visions from the imaginary ones?"

"Be patient. Things will clarify."

"How soon?"

"When you *see* yourself die," he said, "have you ever seen the same scene more than once?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"I've had each one at least twice."

"But one more than any of the others?"

"Yes," I said. "The first one. Myself as an old man in a hospital, with a lot of intricate medical equipment surrounding my bed. That one comes frequently."

"With special intensity?"

I nodded.

"Trust it," Carvajal said. "The others are phantoms. They'll stop bothering you before long. The imaginary ones have a feverish, insubstantial feel to them. They waver and blur at the edges. If you look at them closely, your gaze pierces them and you behold the blankness beyond. Soon they vanish. It's been thirty years, Lew, since such things have troubled me."

"And the Quinn visions? Are they phantoms out of some other time-line too? Have I helped to set a monster loose in this country, or am I just suffering from bad dreams?"

"There's no way I can answer that for you. You'll simply have to wait and see, and learn to refine your vision, and look again, and weigh the evidence."

"You can't give me any suggestions more precise than that?"

"No," he said. "It isn't possible to —"

The doorbell rang.

"Excuse me," Carvajal said.

He left the room. I closed my eyes and let the surf of some unknown tropic sea wash across my mind, a warm salty bath erasing all memory and all pain, making the rough places smooth. I perceived past, present, and future now as equally unreal: wisps of fog, shafts of blurred pastel light, far-off laughter, furry voices speaking in fragementary sentences. Somewhere a play was being produced, but I was no longer on stage, nor was I in the audience. Time lay suspended. Perhaps, eventually, I began to *see*. I think

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Quinn's blunt earnest features hovered before me, bathed in garish green and blue spotlights, and I might have *seen* the old man in the hospital and the armed men moving through the streets; and there were glimpses of worlds beyond worlds, of the empires still unborn, of the dance of the continents, of the sluggish creatures that crawl over the great planet-girdling shell of ice at the end of time. Then I heard voices from the hallway, a man shouting, Carvjal patiently explaining, denying. Something about drugs, a double cross, angry accusations. What? What? I struggled up out of the fog that bound me. There was Carvajal, by the door, confronted by a short, freckle-faced man with wild blue eyes and unkempt flame-red hair. The stranger was clutching a gun, an old clumsy one, a blue-black cannon of a gun, swirling it excitedly from side to side. The shipment, he kept yelling, where's the shipment, what are you trying to pull? And Carvajal shrugged and smiled and shook his head and said, over and over, mildly, This is a mistake, it's simply an error. Carvajal looked radiant. It was as though all his life had been bent and shaped toward this moment of grace, this epiphany, this confused and comic doorway dialog.

I stepped forward, ready to play my part. I devised lines for myself. I would say: *Easy, fellow, stop waving that gun around. You've come to the wrong place. We've got no drugs here.* I saw myself moving confidently toward the intruder, still talking. *Why don't you cool down, put the gun away, phone the boss and get things straightened out? Because otherwise you'll find yourself in heavy trouble, and* — Still talking, looming over the little freckled-faced gunman, calmly reaching for the gun, twisting it out of his hand, pressing him against the wall —

Wrong script. The real script called for me to do nothing. I knew that. I did nothing.

The gunman looked at me, at Carvajal, at me again. He hadn't been expecting me to emerge from the living room, and he wasn't sure how to react. Then came a knock at the outside door. A man's voice from the corridor, asking Carvajal if everything was okay in there. The gunman's eyes flashed in fear and bewilderment. He jerked away from Carvajal, pulling in on himself. There was a shot — almost peripherally, incidentally. Carvajal began to fall but supported himself against the wall. The gunman sprinted past me, toward the living room. Paused there, trembling, in a half crouch. He fired again. A third shot. Then swung suddenly toward the win-

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dow, down the fire escape, disappearing into the street.

I turned toward Carvajal. He had fallen and lay near the entrance to the living room, motionless, silent, eyes open, still breathing. His shirt was bloody down the front; a second patch of blood was spreading along his left arm; there was a third wound, oddly precise and small, at the side of his head, just above the cheekbone. I ran to him and held him and saw his eyes glaze, and it seemed to me he laughed right at the end, a small soft chuckle, but that may be script writing of my own, a little neat stage direction. So. So. Done at last. How calm he had been, how accepting, how glad to be over with it. The scene so long rehearsed, now finally played.

44.

Carvajal died on the 22nd of April, 2000. I write this in early December, with the true beginning of the 21st century and the start of the new millennium just a few weeks away. The coming of the millennium will find me at this unprepossessing house in this unspecified town in northern New Jersey, directing the activities, still barely under way, of the Center for Stochastic Processes. We have been here since August, when Carvajal's will cleared probate with me as sole heir to his millions.

Here at the Center, of course, we don't dabble much in stochastic processes. The place is deceptively named; we are not stochastic here but rather poststochastic, going on beyond the manipulation of probabilities into the certainties of second sight. But I thought it wise not to be too candid about that. What we're doing is a species of witchcraft, more or less, and one of the great lessons of the all-but-concluded twentieth century is that if you want to practice witchcraft, you'd better do it under some other name. "Stochastic" has a pleasant pseudoscientific resonance to it that provides the right texture for a disguise, evoking as it does an image of platoons of pale young researchers feeding data into vast computers.

There are four of us so far. There'll be more. We build gradually, here. I find new followers as I need them. I know the name of the next one already, and I know how I'll persuade him to join us, and at the right moment he'll come to us, just as these first three came. Six months ago they were strangers to me; today they are my brothers.

What we build here is a society, a sodality, a communality, a priesthood, if you will, a band of *seers*. We are extending and refining the capabilities of our

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vision, eliminating ambiguities, sharpening perception. Carvajal was right: everyone has the gift. It can be awakened in anyone. In you. In you. And so we'll reach out, each of us offering a hand to another. Quietly spreading the poststochastic gospel, quietly multiplying the numbers of those who *see*. It'll be slow. There'll be danger, there'll be persecution. Hard times are coming, and not only for us. We still must pass through the era of Quinn, an era that seems as familiar to me as any in history, though it hasn't yet begun: the election that will anoint him is still four years in the future. But I *see* past it, to the upheavals that follow, the turmoil, the pain. Never mind that. We'll outlast the Quinn regime, as we outlasted Assurbanipal. Attila, Genghis Khan, Napoleon. Already the clouds of vision part, and we *see* beyond the coming darkness to the time of healing.

What we build here is a community dedicated to the abolition of uncertainty, the absolute elimination of doubt. Ultimately we will lead mankind into a universe in which nothing is random, nothing is unknown, all is predictable on every level from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, from the twitching of an electron to the journeys of the galactic nebulae. We'll teach humanity to taste the sweet comfort of the foreordained. And in that way we'll become as gods.

Gods? Yes.

Listen, did Jesus know fear when Pilate's centurions came for him? Did he whimper about dying, did he lament the shortening of his ministry? No, no, he went calmly, showing neither fear nor bitterness nor surprise, following the script, playing his appointed role, serenely aware that what was happening to him was part of a predetermined and necessary and inevitable Plan. And what of Isis, the young Isis, loving her brother Osiris, knowing even as a child everything that was in store, that Osiris must be torn apart, that she would seek his sundered body in the mud of the Nile, that through her he would be restored, that from their loins would spring the potent Horus? Isis lived with sorrow, yes, and Isis lived with the foreknowledge of terrible loss, *and she knew these things from the beginning,* for she was a god. And she acted as she had to act. Gods are not granted the power of choice; it is the price and the wonder of their godhead. And gods do not know fear or self-pity or doubt, because they are gods and may not choose any path but the true one. Very well. We shall be as gods, all of us. I have come through the time of doubt; I have endured and survived the

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onslaught of confusions and terrors; I have moved into a realm beyond those things, but not into a paralysis such as afflicted Carvajal. I am in another place, and I can bring you to it. We will *see;* we will understand; we will comprehend the inevitability of the inevitable; we will accept every turn of the script gladly and without regret. There will be no surprises; therefore there will be no pain. We will live in beauty, knowing that we are aspects of the one great Plan.

About forty years ago a French scientist and philosopher named Jacques Monod wrote, "Man knows at last that he is alone in the indifferent immensity of the universe, whence he has emerged by chance."

I believed that, once. You may believe it now.

But examine Monod's statement in the light of a remark that Albert Einstein once made. "God does not throw dice," Einstein said.

One of those statements is wrong. I think I know which one.

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DRACULA REDUX
(This Time Ad Absurdum)

Hello, redux fans, another redux this month (classicists will forgive the mangled Latin of the title). This time it's Dracula, who is lagging behind Frankenstein in the redux sweepstakes, possibly because he is fantasy and Frankenstein is science fiction (subject for a long winded essay we won't go into now).

This *Dracula* is another Andy Warhol-Paul Morrissey number; they were responsible for the *Frankenstein* of some months back. That one I liked minimally, mostly for its use of 3-D. *Dracula* isn't a 3-D movie in any sense; it's more 2-D or maybe 1-D. It is, in fact, godawful.

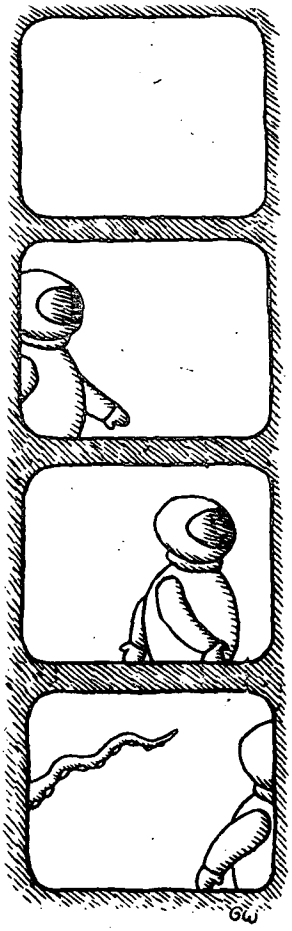
Like its predecessor, it attempts to be campy-funny, scarey and sexy, all at the same time. It succeeds no way, no how.

Last month's movie, *Young Frankenstein, was* funny. It knew and loved what it was spoofing, and every insane moment was intelligent comic exaggeration. Warhol's *Dracula* tries to be comic by simply applying a modern viewpoint and some modern slang to a 19th-century legend moved up to the 1920s.

It's scarey only if you're "scared" by the sight of a living

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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being dismembered by an axe. I draw a line between being scared and being shocked, and I much prefer being subtly frightened to being overtly nauseated. Otherwise, there is no suspense and no evocation of terror or horror here. I must say that the members of the Neanderthal audience I happened to see this with seemed to enjoy the dismemberment hugely (I may be being unfair to Neanderthals; "Neanderthal is nice" was a catchphrase of some million or so years ago, as I remember) and it is they for whom this kind of film is made.

Sexy? Only if you're turned on by the ubiquitous Joe Dallesandro humping various frizzy-haired ladies nudely and graphically though no genitalia are shown save at a distance. The old B horror films had reels and reels of filler between the action; then it was bad dialogue, here it's dull sex. Of course, one man's turn on is another's turn off, but the sex is presented here, like the humor and the horror, so lacking in any kind of style that I can't think of anyone over the age of 16 who would find this titillating (and precious few under).

Still thinking of seeing it? Maybe a brief rundown of the action will dissuade you:

The Rumanian Count Dracula (Udo Keir) is the last of his line and is near death from malnutrition because he needs the blood of young "wirgins" (the dialogue is heavily accented in one way or another, between Keir's German and Dallesandro's Brooklynese) and there's not a wirgin to be found in the entire country. So he and his slimy secretary slave go off to Italy, where hopefully the religious influence has preserved a modicum of maidenhood.

He finds an impoverished noble family with four nubile daughters and insinuates himself on the pretext of searching for a bride. However, the first two he takes a nip on have been dallying with the only servant, a well endowed country boy who tends to chat on about Socialism and the coming revolution while making love. Since the blood is not wirgin, the Count upchucks it graphically and at length into the camera. He then resolves to have at the youngest daughter, who at 14 *must* be a wirgin. She is, but the house boy, divining the Count's intent, deflowers her rapidly and in an upright position (a fate worse than death to prevent a fate worse than death if you take my meaning), grabs an axe and dismembers the Count, finishing off with a stake. The eldest daughter, a spinster type with a few bats in the belfry herself, throws herself on the

(*continued on page 115*)

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Bill Pronzini and Barry Malzberg are two regular contributors who recently collaborated on a major new suspense novel entitled *Off-Center* to be published this Fall by Putnam.

Coming Again

by BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG

I

In the dream, they do not believe me, never and no matter what I say. I beg them but it is useless: they have decided that I am insane, and knowing from my waking life the appearance of obsession, I must agree with them. On one street corner or another, past newsstands or the open doors of a church (in my dream I am cunning and often stand before churches) they trail by, unrepentant. Lost. Lost!

But that must be their problem.

II

Further in the dream, I have come, somehow, into possession of a mimeograph. On this I run off several hundred leaflets before dawn and take them downtown. On Market, near Fifth, near the intersection of Market and Fifth although not quite there, the difference being an important one (I am compulsive in my dreams), I wear the sandwich board and point out the words with an index finger as I scream them. Offer a leaflet or three. HE IS COMING AGAIN! THE SAVIOR IS COMING! Etc. PREPARE YOURSELF! BE CLEAN WITH PRAYER! And so forth.

And they pass: old and young, strong and weak, handsome or ugly (I refuse to look at their women), unheeding. HE IS COMING. NOW! IN THIS TIME, LISTEN! But no contact is made.

I try to hand out leaflets at random; they are brushed to the pavement, two young men, mumbling the devil's words, crumple them in the street. It is all too much for me. Someone hands me a dollar bill and, before I can point out that

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this is not the purpose of my ministry, is gone. I look at the dollar dispassionately, then let it fall to the street where it is snatched away. I do not speak their language.

Night comes. In my dream, I hurry homeward, leaflets gone, filled with revulsion. Another day gone, one more day closer to the Coming...and no progress, no progress. Has no one heard? Is there no other with the Vision? I insist that I am not a lunatic.

In my furnished rooms, I remove the board and shove it under the bed. Ingestion. I take some holy water from the tap in the bathroom and eat a wafer from a box in the closet. Holding this communion to myself, I lie upon the bed and wait for the Visitation.

III

In the morning, free of the dreams, it comes clear to me at last, and I hurry from the bed with lightened step. No time for the sandwich board now, no time for the leaflets which, in any event, existed only in sleep, only one implement to be taken. Settled, settled, I come upon the street and it is as it was in the dreams but then again it is not: a kind of pure clarity settles upon me, and I look at the throngs in this area of urban blight with new tolerance and compassion as I raise my hand.

They turn and listen to me. I always knew that it would be this way. In the hand is a gun. I point it at the nearest (some, at random, must always pay for the Greater Sins) and pull the trigger. He falls, they fall, everyone falls away, leaving me alone now at the high place.

"I am Risen," I say.

COMING SOON . . .

. . . next month: DEADPAN, a super-thriller by Edward Wellen (remember MOUTHPIECE, Feb. 1974?). This new novella concerns an attempt by the Greek government to open a computer version of the Delphic Oracle.

. . . Soon: A brand new novella by Algis Budrys, THE SILENT EYES OF TIME.

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A haunting and touching "ghost" story of sorts from long-time F&SF contributor Mildred Clingerman.

Annabelle, I Love You

by MILDRED CLINGERMAN

Jan. 12. Keeping a journal may well be a revolting habit, but people have been doing it for centuries. I wonder if, like me, they began because they were lonely and sick and bitter? No. Some of them began out of joy. I wonder what joy looks like. That was one of the things I thought about in the hospital, with my eyes and ears closed against all the gabby, false-bright voices of the women in the room with me. Behind my closed eyelids I guessed that joy was an exploding star, like the sun: dangerous to one's health if exposed too long to its rays.

I've just come out of the hospital again. This was my second bout with pneumonia since November. I'm still sick, but they needed my bed for somebody sicker. I've had to take a long leave of absence from my job. My house has that smeared, smudged look houses get when they're left cold and empty. I wish Danny hadn't forced it on me in the divorce settlement. He was feeling guilty, of course, and I was too diminished to argue. How can a gaunt, fleshless unwoman who can't even produce babies produce telling arguments? Lucky Danny. Now he has that soft, small creature he wanted so much, and its soft, small mother.

Jan. 13. Disorder is everywhere — in me, in this house, in my checkbook, in the weather, in the whole street. The garbage collectors have just come and gone, strewing bits of garbage behind them like kings flinging largess to the populace. In my saggy blue bathrobe with my uncombed hair I stand for a few minutes at the window staring out, thinking about this street, and I see it winding its way across the nation. It's a bedroom street and a transition street, I decide. People move from

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here either up or down the economic scale and rehouse themselves accordingly. Nobody stays very long. Somebody, even now, is taking down the FOR SALE signs on the house next door. I never met the last set of owners. Our paths never crossed. Danny and I both worked, as do most of our neighbors. I doubt if anybody on the street knows or cares that Danny moved out over a year ago.

Weakness forces me back to the bed I've made on the sofa. I can't rest in my lonely king-size bed. I listen to the wind moaning around the corners of the house, and I can imagine it peering down my chimney at the old dead ashes. There's plenty of wood in the woodbox and more on the woodpile. Perhaps tonight I'll build a fire. Now I have something warming to think about. All day I can lie here and plan the fire I'll build. I'll think out every move. First, the wadded newspaper. I wonder if the wind has blown away all the yellowing newspapers in the entry? First, I'll open the front door and bring in the newspapers, all of them. If not today, then tomorrow, for sure. And I'll heat up a can of soup. Tomorrow. I really will.

Jan. 15. Yesterday was nothing. It must have been nothing, because I remember nothing. This morning, though, began when I found myself standing thirsty at the kitchen sink. I drank some water and took two pills the doctor made me promise I'd take. Till now I'd forgotten to take them. I thought about coffee. The kitchen window gives me a good view of the house next door. Somebody is moving in. The wind is still blowing, and a young woman in a fur coat stands outside near the moving van while the men unload furniture. On her head she is wearing a heavy red scarf which falls into beautiful ripples and folds as the wind plays with it. There is no chaos around her. The furniture being unloaded arranges itself in order and beauty. She directs the movers, and the pieces are carried inside in patterned sanity. Nothing blows away. Nothing is smashed. It is a ballet, and, wobbly-legged, I cling to the sink while I watch entranced. How queer that I'm back on the sofa scribbling in my security-blanket journal. Perhaps I dreamed the ballet. What happened to the coffee? Did I leave it in the kitchen? (If I was in the kitchen.) It's too far to go back now. I'll think about how many steps it is to the kitchen and decide later if that many steps equals a cup of coffee.

Jan. 16. (I think.) The young woman's name is Annabelle. She has a husband who owns a plumbing supply shop, and they

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have two small children, both girls, who are staying with their grandmother till the moving-in chores are completed. They plan to live here forever. Once they've added a room onto it, the house next door is the house of their dreams. Their grandchildren will visit them there in the misty, dim future, she says. She rang my doorbell yesterday. I always used to believe that poem that says you never know with a doorbell who will be ringing it. But I knew with this ringing exactly who it was. Such a beautifully precise ring — no sloppy punch-punching at the button. I thought about not answering. I couldn't find my old runover house slippers. They were lost under the blanket on the sofa. Never mind the house slippers. I was wearing my saggy blue robe, and there was enough furniture to hang onto almost all the way to the door. It took a while to unbolt the door. Sometimes when I first wake up I can't read the clock staring me right in the face, and I can't make mechanical things work — like bolted doors or automatic coffee makers.

Annabelle can make anything work. She led me back to the sofa, covered me and then worked the can opener and the coffee pot and set up a tray for me. She found my hairbrush and soap and water and towel and tidied me up while the soup heated. She can even make charity and good deeds work. She was quiet and small and warm. She had come to use the telephone to order a telephone for herself. She was a good long while, but I was too dazed with hot food and coffee and tidiness to pay any attention to the calls she made.

She came away from the phone with the name of one of her mother's distant cousins who would love to come and take care of me and my house. Who else in this city but Annabelle would have a widowed old-lady cousin just standing by eager to serve a next-door stranger?

Jan. 18. H.C. (Handy Cousin) is now installed in the guest room. She is an older version of Annabelle-ness. Though I still cling to the sofa, the house and I are tidied beyond belief. I am exhausted. I have been forced into hot, scented baths, pristine night-gowns and my best pink robe. My old slippers no longer hide under the blanket on the sofa. No. My best take-to-the-hospital ones stand neatly side by side on the vacuumed rug. H.C.'s real name is Rosalie, but I persist in calling her H.C. for short. She just laughs. She looks like a tubby little gray pony with neat hooves that stamp, stamp all around the house demolishing disorder. She is an automatic

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producer of hot, heartening food, click, click, every two hours. When Annabelle can break away from her joyous order next door, she comes to survey mine with twinkling satisfaction. She brings me grapes and tangerines and small, delightful books to browse through. The books are not too heavy to hold when one is lying down. They even stay open at the page one is reading when laid aside for a while. Annabelle flings all this bounty down on the coffee table, and it arranges itself into a still-life painting. Oak logs mutter steadily in the fireplace with a green heart inside their flames. The polished brass fender gleams. Warmth envelopes me. I am cozy.

I say, "Annabelle, I hate you. You're too perfect. Everything you do is perfect," and she laughs. She doesn't protest that she has done "nothing...nothing." She simply states, "You'd do the same for any neighbor."

I don't know that I would, actually. And certainly I couldn't have done any of it half so gracefully.

Jan. 20. H.C. was called away today, and I am now on my own. I wrote out a generous check for her, but she said it was too much and she would send me a proper bill later. I hate tearing up checks and writing "void" in my check register. It feels too much like a comment on my life. H.C. hurried away to Annabelle's house, where, apparently, she was to be picked up and passed on by Annabell's husband to some worthier, more challenging case than mine. For I am getting well, and H.C. has no use for people who are getting well and whose houses are in order.

In the afternoon I heard a creaking of wheels and a low murmur of voices. I looked out the front window and saw Annabelle pushing a very old-fashioned baby buggy up the front walk. She was accompanied by a little girl who was carrying a jam jar filled with narcissus. I watched Annabelle park the buggy in the thin sunshine, set the brake carefully and tilt the adjustable top to shade the baby's face. She and the little girl stood smiling and gazing into the buggy for a moment, before they turned away to ring my doorbell.

When I opened the door Annabelle's daughter presented me with the flowers shyly, but in the little white triangle of her face her mouth was half-widened with the fun of a visit and a gift to a new, weird neighbor. But she wouldn't come in. She must stay outside, she said, to keep watch over her baby sister. I guessed that Annabelle was reluctant to bring either of her treasures inside where some stub-

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born germ might be lurking. But nothing today could dampen my spirits. Annabelle and I stood at the window talking. No. That's not true. Annabelle listened, her eyes soft and loving, while I waxed lyrical — raving about the beauty of the day, of her children adorning my front walk, deserving, I said, a master painter's eye and hand. I was seeing great paintings everywhere: the street outside with all the garbage picked up by Annabelle's husband, curving its way between the houses, and hinting, after all, at hope and work and achievement; the bare, beige-colored chinaberry tree looking against the blue sky like a lacquered Chinese screen. I wait for Annabelle's comment on these wonders.

Annabelle answers simply that people recovering from an illness see the world with new, refreshed eyes. Moreover, she suggests, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and why don't I study painting, myself? She has this address of a man two streets over who is a *real artist,* who has paintings hanging all over the United States and Europe and who will think about giving me lessons, if he can stand me. Annabelle doesn't really say that last bit, but hints delicately that the artist is rather difficult. She finds a pencil and scribbles the address on the back of an old envelope. When she hands it to me, some small explosion takes place behind my eyes. I think it might be joy.

Jan. 22. Yesterday I was strong enough to dress and drive down to the shopping center. Besides loading up with all sorts of supplies for the pantry and the house, I gave myself the pleasure of gathering gifts and goodies for Annabelle's children. By the time I got all the food refrigerated and stored away, I collapsed, of course, on my sofa and slept there till bedtime. But this afternoon I mean to walk over to Annabelle's house and revel in all its glories. I want to see Annabelle rocking the baby. I want to hear little triangle face laugh at the funny doll I've brought her. I want to warm myself at their fire.

Later: Oh God. I think I have died and gone to hell. There wasn't anybody at Annabelle's house. *There hadn't been anybody at Annabelle's house.* I stood in the unswept entry and rang and rang the bell. Tattered FOR SALE signs were driven into the dead lawn on each side of the walk. I stumbled around to the back of the house and looked into the uncurtained kitchen window. Nobody had cooked a meal in that kitchen for months. I don't remember how I got myself home again. But here I am, shaking and scribbling, trying

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to fumble my way up and out of the windy, terrifying dark. I have turned all the lights on and the furnace up, but nothing warms my freezing grief.

Again later: *Who cleaned the house?* For it is clean — reasonably clean. I look around for the delightful, small books. There are only my books. The fruit in the bowl is the fruit I bought yesterday. But there sits the jam jar with the dying narcissus! The whole room is scented with them. And there on my old slant-top desk is the envelope with the scribbled address...it is not *my* handwriting, surely?

Some nagging memory makes me kneel on the floor to open the heavy bottom drawer of the desk. It is filled with old family albums and mementos left to me when my grandmother died. I shall spend the rest of this night going through them.

Jan. 23. By ten o'clock this morning I was ringing the doorbell at the address written on the envelope. A man's voice roared at me for God's sake to cease that incessant ringing and come on in. I did. He was standing in the middle of the living room, bracing himself against a chair and waving a coffee pot at me. One leg was in a "walking" cast, and his right arm was in a sling.

"Can you make coffee?" he asked. I said I could most times.

"Then do it," he said. He waved me towards the kitchen and stumped after me.

I cooked breakfast for both of us. Together we built up the fire in the fireplace and settled on the lumpy sofa to finish up the coffee. I asked him to take me as a student. By noon he had agreed to do so.

"You'll probably make a lousy painter," he said. "But you make good coffee."

He told me he had broken his leg and sprained his wrist by falling off a rickety chair while he was trying to replace burnt-out light bulbs in the studio, but that his injuries wouldn't affect either his teaching or his painting, since he was left-handed, anyway.

After touring the studio and surviving the heart and belly blows of his magnificent paintings, I felt strong enough to wash a lot of accumulated dirty dishes and cook lunch for both of us. By three o'clock in the afternoon I was in possession of all the important bits of his life story. By suppertime he knew all about mine, including yesterday's hideous shock, and how I had found healing in the family photograph albums. I told him that my parents and small sister had died in an automobile accident when I was a baby and that I had been brought up by my grand-

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mother.

"And your mother's name was...?" he asked gently.

"Annabelle, of course. I was the baby in the old-fashioned pram."

"And you believe your young mother came back to help you?"

"It warms me to think so. It takes the tight bands off my heart. It eases me," I said.

"I can understand and maybe, even, believe all of it — the way you do — except the part about giving you my address," he said. "How and why, would your ghost-mother have come by that?"

"I don't know." I shook my head. "I don't understand that part, either."

He was silent for a long time and then emitted a short bark of laughter. "This H.C. who trot-trotted around the house...you didn't tell me what her real name was."

"Rosalie."

"My God, girl! That's it." He hugged me with his sound left arm. "Mothers are fantastic. Even long-dead ones. They always think they know what's best for their children — even aging old crocks like me. Rosalie was my mother's name." He was grinning with delight. "You described her perfectly."

"You mean she passed your name on to Annabelle so I would come and help *you?* I don't believe it...I don't believe you. You're making the whole thing up. I'll bet your mother's name was something entirely different — like Agnes, or Sadie."

"Sadie, hell. Believe, girl, *believe!* This relationship was made in heaven." He kissed me for quite a long time.

I began to believe.

(*Films, continued from page 106*)

Count's body for no coherent reason and impales herself, since the house boy has apparently driven it in dull end first (which gives some idea of his mentality).

Is there anything to be said for this messy confection? Grudgingly I concede some excellent photography, mostly of the family's villa, an Italian triumph of *trompe l'oeil* murals and overwrought iron.

So I sincerely suggest that you stay home and watch the news on TV which has just as much blood and twice the laughs.

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Here's a clever new twist on the idea of a computer replacing the judiciary, from "H.W. Whyte," LL. B. Harvard 1965, formerly an estate lawyer with a big Park Avenue firm, now in private practice.

Non Sub Homine

by H. W. WHYTE

When the call came to Cook, the three Japanese were already with him, and that was bad. They had been discussing the UBM licensing arrangement, starting small in Tokyo civil, and if they had heard the other side of the conversation they would have left immediately.

"It's malfunctioning," Jane said. Her voice was under control; but he could sense wires and edges. "There's no output."

"Pending decision?"

"Over an hour," she said.

"Power supply?"

"Power is good." Her voice wavered. "I don't know what's happening," she said.

"All right," said Cook, "I'll be over right away. Stay with it and keep everyone out." He stood holding the receiver absent-mindedly, then slammed it. "I'm sorry gentlemen," Cook said to the Japanese, "there seems to be a little complication." He tried a smile. "Have to get to the plant."

The Japanese nodded vaguely and sat tight.

The 2-10 was efficient and thoroughly programmed. Only an insufficiency of power could have produced no decision. Cook dialed Edison standing and put the query in. The answer would be at the board. Surely it was failed output.

"Well," Cook said, "you might as well come along with me, gentlemen, and make a firsthand observation." There was no sense, after all, in making an abrupt exit; then, who knew what the Japanese would do if let alone at this point? They needed the sublease. The Japanese, looking vaguely as if they were at the point of twittering, stood and followed him out.

The four men crossed the square and walked quickly up the stone-slab steps of the old Foley Square courthouse, the Japanese

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looking with vague disapproval at the pillared porticoes. Nothing in the grey facade of this building suggested that within was housed the largest computer ever built, a monster programmed with every legal decision rendered in the United States since 1789 and every statute ever passed by the Congress and legislatures of the 54 states. While the computer had originally been intended as a library of legal decisions, its opinions on questions previously decided was soon accepted as irrevocable, and under the Court Reform Act of 1994, the 2-10 was given the job of replacing all seated U.S. District Judges and thus deciding all legal questions at the source. The cost of programming the machine had been recouped within the first year with the enormous saving in judge's salaries and legal expenses incurred by the federal government. After two years of service, when it was discovered that the 2-10 had never been reversed by an appellate court, the machine had been given full appellate court authority. The Supreme Court had been retained, but relieved of judicial functions. Supreme Court judgeships remained honorariums with ceremonial functions — for the more prestigious hacks, Cook had decided wryly — administering oaths of office and performing civil marriages on television for actors and well-known politicians.

And in only four and a half years of full service, the 2-10 had generated a new respect for the law ... for Cook knew that the people felt they were no longer subject to the vagaries of an inherently political judiciary, of mindless whim, of the flux of ulcers. By taking law out of the hands of man, the 2-10 had put it beyond corruption.

But now the damned thing had refused to answer a question put to it by the Board of Questioners.

They came into the room and Jane nodded quickly, handed him the readout. The 2-10 was receiving full power; there was no malfunction in the lines. Cook realized for the first time that the matter was no longer routine. It was, in fact, quite the reverse because a breakdown in the 2-10 would be intolerable, the cases would back up, the claims and counterclaims, the increasing worry and then anger of the litigants, the quivering of the entire system, a loss of confidence, anarchy, chaos —

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said to the Japanese and, with somewhat more ceremony than he felt, seized the smallest of them by the arm and helped him scurry out. "There's the possibility of receiving a severe electric shock

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you see. One of the circuit breakers is out. It's nothing serious, but you'll have to go down the hall, maybe to the restaurant, make yourselves at home, try to understand a little bit about the fine tradition of this courthouse, its antiqueness, its charm." He managed to reach the door, helped the Japanese exit with what he hoped was not too much abruptness, and stood aside while the others scurried behind. He wondered vaguely if he had blown the deal and then decided that he didn't care very much, not in proportion, anyway to the problem of the machine. "I don't like Japanese," he said to Jane pointlessly and went back to the machine. "Nothing personal, of course."

"Never personal," she said, "not any more, remember?"

"It had to be that way."

"Forget it," she said. "We've got real trouble here."

The computer, he found, had been asked a simple question about the assignability of a lease under an ambiguous contract. The 2-10 concisely quoted the decisions on both sides of the question ... and then concluded that there was nothing to choose between either result. It had, in fact, even printed out two separate neatly worded and closely reasoned opinions, each reaching opposite conclusions. They read them together and there was nothing to either that was not completely justified. It was clear that either opinion would fully satisfy the litigants who were still waiting in the Hall of Questions below them. By now, those litigants were surely impatient. They had waited a full hour from the time the problems had been submitted to the court. Normally decisions were rendered within ten minutes. Receptionists in the Hall of Questions had been covering for them on Jane's orders.

"Well?" Jane said. "You're responsible. What do we do if we can't give them a decision?"

"The 2-10 is infallible," Cook found himself saying. "It cannot be permitted to fail."

"Yes," she said. "With you, the machine could never fail. People, relationships, meaning, all of that, that didn't matter at all just as long as the damned machines —"

"Forget it," he said abstractedly, remembering vaguely that at some time in the past he had or had not loved the girl; it didn't matter, none of that counted at all. The system was being threatened, that was the point, and the way to deal with it was also becoming clear. The machine had to render a decision.

"The machine has to make a decision," he said.

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"How? It can't."

"Wait," Cook said. He took the two opinions that the 2-10 had printed out, one for plaintiff and the other for the defendant, and he weighed them in his hands. His right hand had seized the decision for the defendant, and in a moment he was tearing it to shreds.

"Here," he said, "report this one." He gave her the plaintiff's judgment.

"But —"

"We have to have a decision," Cook said. "Now process it."

And in ten more minutes it was over: the decision had been rendered and the litigants, winners and losers, were satisfied. So, he supposed, were the vanished Japanese who had not come back. Working with the girl, Cook added within the hour a system to the 2-10's program for deciding all cases in the future in which justice would be equal to either side. Such cases were to be governed by a random sequence of decisions, some for plaintiff and some for defendant. It was very simple. There was nothing to it. The impartiality of the machine could never be questioned, nor its authority.

And no one would ever find the key to unlock the new program.

There was only one more thing to do, Cook thought. Just one more thing. "Excuse me," Jane said, standing at the door, "I'm going to leave now."

"Sure," Cook said abstractedly.

"We're finished, right? You don't need me for anything now that the new program is in."

"That's right," Cook said, "I guess that's right."

"You're a cold person," she said and left. Cook stood in front of the computer input for a while.

I'm not cold, he thought, I'm not cold at all. I have feelings. Feelings for the responsibility here. Feelings for the 2-10. Feelings —

She's getting in the way, Cook thought, she knows too much. She knows what we've done. At any future date —

He turned back toward input. There was a way to generate high voltage in the terminals. Cook knew how to do it. High voltage could kill the next user.

Working, Cook thought, only a feeling person would do this.

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Lisa Tuttle ("Dollburger," February 1973) is a recent graduate of Syracuse University and the winner of the 1974 John W. Campbell award for the best new sf writer. Steven Utley, new to these pages, writes: "25-going-on-26, ex Air Force brat, college dropout. I've sold about three dozen stories and poems to *Galaxy, Vertex* and a slew of anthologies . . ."

Flies by Night

by LISA TUTTLE and STEVEN UTLEY

I remember I used to wake nights and hear my mother walking about on the ceiling.

In the daytime she was just another little lady, small and undistinguished. You meet hundreds like her in your lifetime and forget all of them. My mother wasn't even boring. She was forgettable — but that was just her shell. If you'd seen what she was inside, you would never have forgotten her.

My mother was a fly inside her human body, and she split open and came out at night when my father, who was nothing at all, slept. It should have been a wondrous thing, to be a fly. She could have flown all over the city, gazed down with jeweled eyes. I would have. But to my mother the transformation, at eighteen, was a shock, an affliction. She didn't know what to do with it, and so, in reaction, she got married immediately, and to a man so thick, so dull, that she could have let him wake in the mornings to her empty woman-skin beside him, and he would have said good morning to it as usual, then berated it for not making him his coffee.

Such a man fathered me. And when I was eighteen, and no wondrous change was worked on me, I began to hate him for dooming me to this heavy, earthbound life. Why couldn't she have waited? Why didn't my fearful mother wait for one of her own kind? Then they could have flown together, loved together in midair or on the ceiling. Instead, my mother climbs guiltily out of her skin for a few hours at night, and, just to feel the relief and stretch her wings, she goes out and

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flies around the neighborhood.

I can't do even that. Sometimes my skin itches so that I *know* it must be my real self trying to get out. I scratch at myself, tear at my skin until it bleeds, but it never helps.

Oh, please, I want to get out. I want to fly.

Clarisse awoke, feeling breath warm on her cheek. Her husband Dan loomed over her, his eyes shining in the moonlight from the window. She felt unaccountably terrified that he should have been watching her while she slept.

"What's wrong?" she asked sharply.

"You were talking in your sleep."

"Mmmmph." She tried to sound sleepy and rolled over, turning her back to him.

"Clarisse," Dan said, "what were you dreaming about?"

Oh, Christ, not again.

"Who knows?"

"I think you know. And I find it very disturbing that you won't confide in me."

She flopped onto her back. "Confide? What's to confide? I don't remember my stupid dream. I'm sorry, but I am very tired, so why don't you let me go back to sleep?"

"I'm talking about a lot more than just this dream, Clarisse."

She sighed. "Okay. What did I say? Did I say a man's name, is that what it is, Dan?"

"You're assuming that. To me, that says you are afraid you've said a man's name — that it is likely." He spoke pedantically. He fancied himself a psychiatrist. Why, Clarisse wondered, should that quality, so repellent now, have been so attractive before they were married?

"I'm assuming that," she replied, "because you're playing the jealous husband. What am I supposed to assume?"

"Why are you so defensive?"

"Why are you so *off*ensive?"

There was a hurt silence. Clarisse sat up and turned on the bedside lamp.

"I'm sorry, Dan," she said, putting her hand on his arm. "But you know I hate arguing with you, and to wake me up in the middle of the night to argue about something as ridiculous as this —"

"I didn't wake you up."

"Maybe not, but you didn't let me go back to sleep, either."

"There was a time, you know, when you liked talking to me no matter what hour it was."

"I've never liked arguing with you, Dan."

"Then why do you persist? I'm only asking you to trust me. Unless you've betrayed me, there is no reason to be so secretive. What are

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you hiding from me?"

"I'm not hiding *anything* — I swear to you!" When he said nothing, Clarisse turned off the light and lay down. She felt him move his hand over her breasts.

"Another thing," he said quietly, "which makes me doubt you...."

No, she thought. *Not now. You can't.*

"You never seem to feel loving anymore." Dan was caressing her hip now. "You're always too tired, and I can't understand that. I'm the one who goes to work, you know. I'm the one who should be tired, not you. So I can't help but wonder what it is that makes my Clarisse so tired."

The only way to end it was to give in. She moved closer to him, hoping that she could pretend enthusiasm. "It's really nothing to do with you," she said. "Maybe I'm coming down with something — I'm so loggy and tired all the time."

"I think I've got the cure for that," he murmured in her ear, turning her to ice inside. "Hmmm? Would you like to try my cure?"

Oh, please let me out.

I got married because I thought I had to; only something happened after we were married, and it turned out that I wasn't going to have a baby after all. He was the first man I ever slept with, but because I slept with him before the wedding, he thought I was immoral. I didn't find this out until later, after we had been married a few months, when everything began to go wrong.

He accused me of sleeping with, or of wanting to sleep with, every man he saw me look at. I was glad, then, that I hadn't told him about my mother. I had thought I would, after we were married, because he was such a strong man, such a comfort, and I was sure he would understand. But that impression began to seem a mistake, and I was glad I had told him that I didn't have a mother, that my mother was dead. And I knew I could never tell him about the other me, the real me, the me-that-might-be.

In my dreams, I could fly, and my dreams were all I had. Perhaps it was my wanting to dream that made me sleep so much more, that made me so tired all the time. Dan would get me up in the morning to make his breakfast, but once he had gone off to work, I would go back to bed and fall asleep again, to dream of flying. I always set the alarm so that I could get up and dress and do the breakfast dishes and start dinner before Dan came home. After dinner I would be yawning uncontrollably, as tired as if I'd been awake for days.

I dream at night of wings,

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translucent teardrops, rainbow silk stretched taut on fine wire frames.

Clarisse finally identified the intrusive sound as the doorbell and came fully awake. Some seconds more elapsed while she fought off the sheets and blankets she had wrapped around herself, for she had a tendency to burrow into a bed when she slept alone.

She thought that by the time she got to the door her visitor might have vanished, but she was not so lucky. Dan's mother was on the front porch, looking as if she were prepared to wait all day for her summons to be answered.

"Mrs. Brent," said Clarisse, flushing slightly in embarrassment. "Won't you come in?" She was uncomfortably aware of how she must look — what a sluttish housewife the elder Mrs. Brent would think her! Mrs. Brent's house was always neat, always, it seemed, ready to be photographed for an interior decorators' magazine. Here the breakfast dishes were still in the sink, and Clarisse knew that it must be noon.

"May I get you some coffee?" she asked her mother-in-law.

"Don't bother."

"Oh, it's no bother, Mrs. Brent. It's still on the stove. I'll only have to heat it."

"No. Thank you."

Clarisse plucked at her robe helplessly. "I'm awfully sorry about the way the house looks, and the way I'm dressed. You probably think I'm terrible, but I wasn't feeling too well this morning, so I've been resting in bed."

"Of course," Mrs. Brent said flatly. "Shall we sit down?"

"Certainly, yes, forgive me." They sat. Clarisse abruptly became aware of a faint sound, the high, barely audible buzz of a trapped, unseen fly butting its head against a window pane. And she saw the flicker of small muscles at the corners of her mother-in-law's eyes, a flicker of annoyance commingled with a perverse sort of gratification, as though some terrible hunger had been appeased, some dark need satisfied, by this further evidence of indifferent housekeeping upon Clairsse's part.

"Clarisse," said Mrs. Brent, "I'll get right to the point. I am not a woman to beat around the bush."

Clarisse nodded attentively, feeling a yawn building up in her. She fought it.

"Daniel is concerned with you. He feels that you're keeping some secret from him, and he's very hurt."

"Oh, but I'm not keeping any secrets, Mrs. Brent. I know he thinks so, but —"

"Please." Mrs. Brent held up a hand, a pained expression on her

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face. "I know Daniel very well, and he has always been an unusually sensitive person, almost one might say, psychic." She smiled depreciatingly. "If Daniel feels that you're keeping something from him, then you *are* keeping something from him. I don't know what this secret of yours is, although I have my ideas. But what I've come to tell you is this: confide in Daniel. Don't keep secrets from your husband — as far as the church is concerned, you are of one flesh, he is the head and you are the body. And it's totally absurd to imagine the body keeping secrets from the head! Isn't it?"

Clarisse nodded miserably, trying to keep her eyes open. She was so tired.

"Of course it is," the older woman went on. "Although Daniel has told me you are not a churchgoer, nevertheless, you understand. I have this to say to you: stop keeping secrets from Daniel, or leave him. If you must have your private life, your little secrets, then you're not a fit wife for him. God knows, he would be miserable if you left him, but he would heal in time, and better the quick, sharp pain of loss than the years of the agony of an unfaithful wife."

"Mrs. Brent," said Clarisse, trying to summon up enough energy for anger, "I'm *not* —"

"I don't care what you are." The older woman stood up and seemed to listen for a moment. The unseen fly could no longer be heard. Mrs. Brent favored Clarisse with a hard-edged smile and said, "Think about what I've told you."

Clarisse nodded, blinking with exhaustion. Mrs. Brent let herself out. Clarisse tried to rise and found she could not. She stopped fighting then and let herself fall asleep in the chair. Dan found her there, still sleeping, when he got home.

Things got worse and worse. He was at me all the time, remorseless, relentless, totally implacable. To make matters worse, I could no longer predict my body's reactions. Sometimes I would be looking at him, and suddenly I would perceive him as from a very great distance; then again my eye would focus upon him and bring some inconsequential detail like the mole on his left cheek into mountainous relief. Or he splintered into jagged fragments.

Once I tried to tell him what was the matter with me. Once, when he was badgering me, because I thought he might understand. It was worse than useless.

I broke into unexplained sweats, I had sudden, irrational

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desires, and I tried, when I saw that he did not believe I was sick, to pretend I was normal and well. I slept away the weekdays and functioned like a zombie, like a puppet, at night and on the weekends, listening to him but hearing nothing, letting him guide me around, set me here, stand me there, letting him touch me with his mouth, feeling his hands on me and his penis inside me, staring at him for minutes at a time, wondering who he was.

One night I woke up with fire under my shoulder blades. I was sore from his love-making, and his dried semen pulled at the fine, almost invisible hairs on the inner side on my thigh. I got out of bed and went into the bathroom, and in the mirror above the sink was the reflection of a small and undistinguished woman whom I did not recognize at first.

I went back to bed and lay awake until sunrise, watching the light of dawn suffuse the room, listening to the soft burr of breath through his nostrils, feeling shadows jump under my skin. The man who was my husband slept beside me, and I was reminded of my father and of my poor mother. How many mornings had she lain awake beside him, tight and itching in her skin, wanting and not daring to be free?

I knew what I wanted, and I realized then that I had been repressing myself — so very like my mother. I would take it no longer; I would stop worrying about the consequences. I no longer loved this man, if, indeed, I ever had. He was a stranger to me. More than that, he was a stranger who had taken liberties with my life.

Quietly, quietly, I got up and slipped into a dress. I didn't bother with underwear or anything else except shoes. It would be chilly outside, but I welcomed the chill.

I walked to the corner and caught a bus for downtown. I wanted to be high and free, away from other people, where I could breathe.

A strong updraft plucked at her hair. It was very cold on the ledge, but she did not feel the rasp of the wind on her naked body. Her body was quite numb, quite rigid, impossibly hard.

Eighteen stories below, a crowd watched and waited, peering upward, pointing, hoping. She gazed down at them and the moving bugs in the streets, but her eyes were glazed. She saw nothing that was obvious to the men who were trying to coax her back into the building. She seemed to be listening intently, as if she were awaiting the command to jump. She did not appear to hear the men

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as they called to her from the window, crooned their soothing songs, offered their saving hands.

Her husband was frantic. He insisted that he could bring her in if they would let him climb out after her.

"Keep him out of the way," grumbled a police lieutenant as he buckled himself into a safety harness. "If she sees him she may jump for sure. I'm going out on the ledge."

He leaned out the window again. "Clarisse?"

Clarisse surprised the lieutenant by turning her head towards him.

"Clarisse," said the man, "I want to help you. Don't be frightened. I'm your friend, so you don't have anything to worry about."

She still wore that listening look, but he sensed that she was not listening to him. Suddenly, she smiled, and he felt quite shocked by the smile.

"Oh, at last," she murmured, and grew quiet. A small, dark spot appeared on her forehead, swelled slightly and became a fine seam that moved swiftly over the top of her skull to plunge down the hollow of her back to the crack of her buttocks. She jerked spasmodically and, with infinite slowness, began to topple forward. Then her back bulged outward and burst along the seam with the sound of many sheets tearing.

Out of the ruptured, slowly toppling body emerged a glistening head with gleaming, million-faceted eyes. Filmy, wire-veined wings like stained-glass windows unfurled, sparkling wetly beneath the morning sun, and were followed by a long, segmented body.

She pulled herself out and rested daintily on the ledge, drying her wings in the cold air, watching her old body complete its slowmotion pitch forward, watching it spin and float down eighteen stories, the honey-blonde mass of hair whipping about the paraffin shoulders, the smile frozen on the translucent face.

Then she gave a gentle push with her six silver legs and flew away on whirring rainbows.

Inside, the men were paralyzed for a few moments, all of them crowded together at the window and staring out in unwilling belief. Daniel Brent was the first to speak, and he was quite incoherent with rage. "She — she —" was all he could say.

But the men wasted only those first few seconds, no more. With accord, they donned their spider suits and set out after me.

I circled above the city, awed, happy, a little frightened, a little uncertain, waiting to see what

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happened next. I felt the urge to climb as high as I could go, to remain gloriously suspended between stars and the closer, brighter lights of the world below, to mate with one of my own kind, to live out my new life above the earth. But something held me back, something that bordered on grief as I thought again of my mother, who had permitted herself to be robbed of this, who had chosen to live out her life in that drab woman-skin. And this something, this grief, was my undoing. I should not have stayed near the city; I should have been wiser. But I continued to circle around and around, shedding golden tears from the drupelet-like facets of my eyes, golden tears of grief for my mother. I dropped closer to the city when night fell, and that is when and how they caught me.

I would have been safe if I'd yielded to my first instinct and flown far away — they could never have followed then, because spiders don't fly, they only weave webs to catch flies.

They keep me in this sticky web, too sophisticated to eat me outright. Sometimes, at night, Dan unbinds me and lets me crawl around. But he's cut off my wings, and I can never fly again.

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THE OLYMPIAN SNOWS

I am very concerned about the titles of these essays. When I don't have a good title, I have trouble beginning. Sometimes when I think of a very good title, I deliberately invent an essay to fit around it. Since this essay is the 200th in this series, I felt it necessary to pick a significant subject and build it around a particularly good title — poetic, witty, surprising, *something.*

As for a topic, it occurred to me that there is nothing so dramatic for a science-fictionish person such as myself as the Martian canals. Virtually no writer of 20th Century science fiction has failed to mention them.*

At once, it occurred to me, for reasons that will become apparent as I go along that "The Snows of Olympus" would be a perfect title. I was very pleased with myself and made up my mind that as soon as the appropriate time came I would prepare an essay with that title on that subject.

Then, a few days later, when I was wiling away some moments at a newsstand, I suddenly became

**I mentioned them, for instance, in my story. "Heredity"* (Astonishing, *April 1941*) *to cite just one example.*

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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aware of the name of my good friend, Arthur C. Clarke, on the cover of the current *Playboy,* though I don't remember how I came to be looking in that direction. Interested to see what my dear friend, Arthur, might have to say, I steered austerely past acres of female skin and reached the indicated page.

— And do you know what Arthur had there? A very brief discussion of Mars, and the title he had tacked on was "The Snows of Olympus." I'm probably the only person in history who gasped and choked and jumped up and down while staring at a page in *Playboy* that had no trace of womankind upon it.

I had to think quickly and I did. The next time I meet my rotten friend, Arthur, I intend to choke him and beat his head against the wall, since it's clear to me he did it on purpose. And meanwhile, I quickly changed the title of my article into something completely different as you will already have noticed.

And now, to work —

The first telescopic discovery made when Galileo turned his initial spy-glass on the sky in 1609 was that of the mountains and craters on the Moon. Galileo himself was able to make the first crude drawing of the Moon's surface, and with better and better telescopes built, other astronomers drew better, more detailed, and more accurate maps of the Moon's surface.

It might have seemed at that time that if only telescopes could be made steadily bigger and better, astronomers could, in similar fashion, map all the other worlds of the Solar system.

Alas, it proved not to be so. The great outer planets, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune, are perpetually cloud-covered, and all we can map are the cloud bands of Jupiter and Saturn. As for the smaller bodies of the outer Solar system, asteroids, satellites and the like, no telescope was ever built (or is ever likely to be built on Earth's surface) that could make them out well enough to give any surface detail even where no obscuring atmosphere exists.

That leaves us with the objects of the inner Solar system, other than the Earth and the Moon, as possible map-targets. There are only five of these. Working outward from the Sun, there is Mercury, Venus, Mars, and the two Martian moons, Phobos and Deimos.

Of these five, Phobos and Deimos are too small to show up as anything but dots of light in even the best telescopes, and Venus is

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perpetually cloud-covered, and with featureless clouds at that. Mercury lacks an atmosphere and exposes its bare surface, but when it is most easily studied, it is 110,000,000 kilometers away, is visible as a fat crescent with most of its surface dark, and is too close to the Sun to make for easy viewing. All that can be seen of the Mercurian surface from Earth-based telescopes are just vague splotches that have never amounted to anything much.

That leaves Mars as the *only* object, other than Earth and Moon, that mankind could possibly have mapped prior to the Space Age.

Earth's average distance from the Sun is 150,000,000 kilometers, while Mars's average distance is 228,000,000 kilometers. If both moved around the Sun in perfectly circular orbits, then every time Earth passed Mars ("opposition") the two planets would be 78,000,000 kilometers apart.

The orbits are not circular, however, but somewhat elliptical so that they are closer together in some places than in others. The two orbits may be as far apart as 99,000,000 kilometers, or as close together as 56,000,000 kilometers.

It is always best to observe Mars at opposition, when it is closer to us than it will be for months before and months afterward, and when it shines high in the midnight sky, with its entire surface facing us brightly Sunlit. When the opposition takes place at times when the two planets are moving through those portions of their orbits that are relatively close together, so much the better. At the closest opposition, Mars is only about 150 times as far away as the Moon, and no other sizable body but the cloud-covered Venus ever gets that close to Earth.

The first close opposition after telescopes had become a common adjunct of astronomy was in 1638, and in that year the Italian astronomer, Francesco Fontana, made the first attempt to draw what he saw when he looked at Mars. Since he didn't see much, we can only record it as a first attempt and pass on.

The first astronomer to see something on Mars that eventually came to be accepted as a real feature of the surface was the Dutchman Christian Huygens. On November 28, 1659, he drew a picture of Mars that included a V-shaped dark spot in the equatorial region. It continued to appear in every pictorialization of the Martian surface thereafter.

On August 13, 1672, Huygens went on to draw another map in which he indicated an icecap for the first time.

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Both Huygens and the Italian-French astronomer Giovanni Domenico Cassini tried to note the changes in position of the various vague spots they saw on the Martian surface from night to night, and to make use of such changes to determine the planetary rotation period.

In 1664, Cassini found the Martian rotation to have a period of 24 hours and 40 minutes. This is only 2.6 minutes faster than the figure now accepted and is certainly not bad for a first try.

As observation of Mars continued, its similarities to Earth strengthened. Not only was the Martian day very similar in length to the Earth day, but the inclination of the Martian axis to its plane of revolution about the Sun (25.2°) was very similar to Earth's 23.5°. That meant that Mars had seasons very like those of Earth, except that each was almost twice as long as Earth's and, on the whole, considerably colder.

The German-English astronomer William Herschel, studying Mars in the 1770s and 1780s, noted the presence of an atmosphere on Mars and detected color changes with the seasons.

All of this was important in connection with the problems of life on other worlds.

In early modern times, astronomers had a tendency to assume that all worlds were inhabited, if only because it seemed sacrilegious to suppose that God would create a world and let it be wasted. Yet everything astronomers learned about the worlds of the Solar system went against this supposition. The world that was closest and best-known, the Moon, plainly had neither air nor water and couldn't possibly support life after Earth's fashion. And if it was a dead world, surely others might be, too.

Naturally, this was disappointing — and by the world outside it was ignored. The average layman continued to assume life on all planets, and so did the science fiction writer. (In one of my first published stories, "The Callistan Menace," I calmly gave the Jovian satellite, Callisto, a native life of its own.)

Astronomers, however, could not console themselves with any such romantic escapes. The Solar system increasingly seemed a collection of worlds that were, for the most part, dead — and the more that seemed to be so, the more astronomers found themselves attracted to Mars, which, with its statistics, its ice-caps, its color-changes, seemed so Earth-like and therefore so alive.

In 1830, two German astronomers, Wilhelm Beer (a brother of the

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composer, Giacomo Meyerbeer) and Johann Heinrich von Madler, studied the surface of Mars during a close opposition and produced the first drawings that were recognizable maps of the planet.

Until then, the vague dark and light markings had, for the most part, seemed so vague that observers thought they were cloud formations or patches of mist. Beer and von Madler were the first, however, to determine that some dark and light markings were reasonably permanent, and it was these that they tried to draw.

The map wasn't a very good one by later standards, but it was the first to set up a system of latitude and longitude similar to that on Earth. The lines of latitude, based on the equator and the poles, were simple to define, but the lines of longitude had to be marked off from some arbitrary zero mark. This, Beer and Madler placed on a small, round, dark marking they saw particularly clearly, and that standard has been modified only slightly since.

Other astronomers in the decades that followed also tried to draw maps. One of them was an English astronomer, Richard Anthony Proctor, who drew a map of Mars in 1867 and was so confident of his results that he decided to name the various features. He called the dark areas oceans, seas and straits, while the light areas he called continents and lands. He named all the markings after astronomers, living and dead.

The system had worked for the Moon, but Proctor favored English astronomers so heavily, that French and German astronomers were bitterly offended and the system was *not* accepted.

Then came 1877, when Mars was to move into opposition at virtually the minimum possible distance. Astronomers, using the best instruments they could, were at hand. One of them was the American astronomer Asaph Hall, who discovered Mars's two tiny satellites during this opposition, but that is another story.

Another was the Italian astronomer Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli, who, as a result of his observations, was able to draw the first modern map of Mars, one that lasted, with minor modifications, for nearly a century.

More important still, Schiaparelli worked out a new system for naming the Martian features, one that was far more successful than Proctor's and which, in fact, is still used today.

For one thing, Schiaparelli avoided national rivalries by using Latin

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exclusively, and for another he made use of Mediterranean place names taken from ancient history, mythology and the Bible. Thus, the dark feature that had first been spotted by Huygens, Schiaparelli named "Syrtis Major" ("Great bog"), for he still assumed, as did everyone else, that the dark markings were water and the light markings land.

Ever since, various Martian markings have received romantic and sonorous Latin names. A light spot located at a Martian longitude of 135° some 20° north of the Martian equator was named "Nix Olympica" which I choose to translate as "The Olympian Snows."

Like Proctor, Schiaparelli noted narrow, dark markings which crossed the light regions and connected larger dark markings at either end Proctor had called them "straits" and Schiaparelli called them "channels." Schiaparelli gave the various channels the names of rivers. Four of them, for instance, were Gehon, Hiddekel, Euphrates, and Phison, from the four rivers in the Garden of Eden. There were Lethes and Nepenthes from the rivers of Hades, and there were Orontes and Nilus from real geography. There was, in all this, no suggestion of anything but natural waterways.

In calling them "channels," however, Schiaparelli used the Italian word "canali," which (rather naturally) was translated into the English word "canals." Whereas, in English, a channel is a natural waterway, a canal is a man-made one, and that made an enormous difference.

As soon as men began to talk about the "canals of Mars," all the longing to have the worlds of the Universe inhabited, and all the particular feelings that Mars, at least, was an Earth-like world — came to a head. Mars seemed not only to be inhabited, but it had to have a high civilization capable of irrigating the entire planet with gigantic engineering works.

It became easy, in fact, to work up a very romantic story about Mars. It was a small world, with only one-tenth the mass of Earth and only two-fifths Earth's surface gravity. Mars might hold on to its water so feebly that, little by little, water escaped into space so that Mars grew drier and drier by very slow stages.

Fighting against this gradual desiccation was a gallant, if aging, civilization, making what use it could of the ice-caps, the planet's last reservoir of water.

With more and more astronomers eagerly looking at the canals, more and more dramatic phenomena were reported. Individual canals were found to double on occasion. Where canals crossed there were little round

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areas of darkness which, in 1892, the American astronomer, William Henry Pickering, suggested be called "oases."

It was in 1893, however, that the matter of the Martian canals began to come to full flower, for in that year, the American astronomer, Percival Lowell, grew interested.

Lowell, scion of an artistocratic Boston family, had wealth enough to humor his whims, and he built an excellent observatory in the mile-high dry desert air of Flagstaff, Arizona. There he devoted himself to a fifteen-year study of the surface of Mars.

He drew more and more elaborate maps, showing more and more canals, until finally he was able to draw 500 of them. No one else could see anything like the detail Lowell could, but that did not disturb Lowell. He maintained that other astronomers had poorer eyes and poorer instruments and were watching Mars in poorer climates.

What's more, Lowell insisted that the canals *were* artificial and that Mars *was* the home of an advanced civilization. He presented this view to the general public for the first time in a book named *Mars* published in 1895.

The general public is, of course, always ready to accept the dramatic, and the Lowellian view was widely hailed by many. Among the enthusiasts was the English writer, Herbert George Wells.

In 1898, Wells published *The War of the Worlds*. Following the Lowellian view, Wells pictured Mars as a dying world. Its leaders decided that to remain on Mars was slow suicide and that they must therefore migrate to flourishing, watery Earth. The Martian ships landed on Earth (all of them in England, for some reason, though Wells nowhere indicates he finds this strange) and proceeded to take over the island as brutally and indifferently as we would take over one that was inhabited only by rabbits. The Martians were defeated only when they fell prey to Earth's decay germs, against which they had no defense.

The book, as far as I know, was the first tale of interplanetary warfare ever written and was even more influential than Lowell's book in convincing non-astronomers that there was intelligent life on Mars.

Among astronomers, Lowell's views were not generally accepted. Many of them, including some of the best observers, simply did not see the canals. An Italian astronomer, Vincenzo Cerulli, held that the canals were an optical illusion. There were, he claimed, irregular patches on the Martian surface, patches that were just at the limit of vision. The eye, straining to see them, ran them together into straight lines.

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The French astronomer, Eugenios Marie Antoniadi, made maps of Mars, beginning in 1909, that were superior to Schiaparelli's, and he saw no canals. He saw irregular spots as Cerulli had suggested.

And yet many astronomers *did* see the canals, and there seemed no way of settling the matter definitely. None of the advances after Schiaparelli's time seemed to help. New large telescopes were built, and each in turn was eagerly turned on Mars, and each had to fall back defeated. The very large telescopes greatly magnified the image of Mars, but they also magnified the distorting effect of temperature changes in the atmosphere. Although the large telescopes were excellent for studying deep space, they were not so good for studying the nearby planets, at least as long as they had to work from the bottom of an ocean of air.

Nor could the new technique of photography do any good. Photographs of the planets were never as clear as the seeing one could get by way of the eye at the telescope. For one thing, the photographic plates were themselves grainy, and that introduced an unavoidable fuzz. For another, the plates required a time exposure and that gave an opportunity for atmospheric imperfections to obscure detail. With the eye, you could get brief flashes of intimate detail at moments when the air was absolutely clear, detail that you could never get in phtographs.

Right down to 1965, then, one could still argue over whether there were canals on Mars or not.

As the 20th Century progressed, however, it began to seem less and less likely that the canals, even if they existed, could be the product of an advanced race of intelligent beings that were *now* living on Mars, for as studies continued, the Martian environment began to seem less and less hospitable.

The Martian atmosphere, it turned out, was thinner than expected, and, what's more, it contained no oxygen at all; it was nothing more than a whiff of carbon dioxide and, possibly, nitrogen.

Again, Mars was even drier than had been expected. The planet had no lakes or seas or bogs, despite the use of Latin words signifying such features. There was no snow, it seemed quite certain, in the area of "The Olympian Snows." The polar ice-caps seemed to be the only water of account on the planet, and they might be only a few inches thick. For that matter, they might not even be water. There seemed increasing reason to think they were made up of frozen carbon dioxide.

Under these conditions, the canals, if they existed, were useless.

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Perhaps they might have been useful once, when Mars was milder, and had more water and air, but when might *that* have been — if ever?

Yet, despite everything, some astronomers *did* see canals, and most people *did* believe in them.

Nothing more could be done until some view of Mars could be taken under conditions better than those possible for views taken from the Earth's surface. Instruments simply had to be sent to the neighborhood of Mars.

On November 28, 1964, a mighty step was taken in this direction when Mars-probe "Mariner 4" was launched. In 1965, it sent back some twenty photographs taken from a distance of 9,500 kilometers above the Martian surface. The photographs showed no signs of canals, no signs of great engineering achievements, no signs of intelligent life. What the photographs *did* show was a Martian surface littered with craters, very much like that of the Moon.

Other data sent back by Mariner 4 seemed to show that the Martian atmosphere was even thinner than the most pessimistic estimate, and the Martian environment more hostile.

On May 30, 1971, another Mars-probe, "Mariner 9", was launched and sent out toward the planet. On November 14, 1971, it was placed in orbit about 1,600 kilometers above the surface of Mars. This was not a matter of just flying by and catching what photographs it could; Mariner 9 was intended to circle Mars indefinitely and to take photographs for an extended period, eventually (if all went well) mapping the entire surface.

While Mariner 9 was on its way to Mars, a dust storm broke out on the planet and continued for months, obscuring the surface of the world completely. Mariner 9 had to wait. By the end of December 1971, the dust storm subsided, and on January 2, 1972, Mariner 9 began to take its photographs. Eventually, the entire planet was indeed mapped, and it was quickly apparent that the limited sections photographed on earlier missions had not, after all, been representative of the planet as a whole. There were, it is true, large areas that were heavily cratered and seemed Moon-like in nature, but these were largely confined to one hemisphere of the planet. The other hemisphere was like nothing on the Moon, or on the Earth, either.

The most startling feature turned out to be Nix Olympica. There were no snows, of course, but it was much more than the rather unimpressive Mount Olympus of the Greeks. Nix Olympica, the Olympian Snows, was a volcano, a giant volcano, 500 kilometers wide at the base and therefore

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twice as wide as the largest volcano on Earth — the one that makes up the island of Hawaii. The crater at the top is 65 kilometers wide. Smaller Martian volcanoes were noted in the vicinity of Nix Olympica. Mars was alive — but not in the Loewellian sense.

Southeast of the volcanoes is a system of Martian canyons which also dwarfs anything on Earth. They stretch across a distance equal to the full breadth of the United States; they are up to four times as deep as the Grand Canyon and up to six times as wide — but they, by themselves could not account for the canals of Lowell.

In fact, there were no canals. With the whole surface of Mars photographed in meticulous detail, there is nothing that can represent what Schiaparelli, Lowell, and a number of others thought they had seen. It *was* optical illusion after all, and the Martian canals which had existed in the minds of men, and in uncounted numbers of science fiction stories (including mine) came to the end of their century-long life.

And Mars became the third world to be mapped in detail.

In addition, the Mars-probes caught sight of the little satellites of Mars, irregular potato-shaped objects with craters on them almost as large as they were themselves.

In 1974, a Mercury-probe mapped virtually the entire surface of that smallest and Sun-nearest planet, and it turned out to be another heavily cratered world. It looked like a rather more finely stippled Moon, since the individual craters are smaller in comparison with Mercury's size, which is distinctly larger than that of the Moon.

Of all the permanent worlds of the inner Solar system then, only

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Venus remains unmapped in detail, since it alone has a surface obscured by clouds. (Earth's is obscured by clouds, too, but we are *under* Earth's clouds.)

All is not lost, though. Venus has been observed by means of radar which can penetrate the cloud layer, strike the ground and be reflected from it. From changes in the nature of the radar beam after reflection, some conclusions can be made as to the nature of the ground, and mountain ranges have been roughly plotted on the Venerian surface.

And what about the vast reaches beyond the orbit of Mars?

Pioneer 10, a Jupiter-probe that passed that planet in December 1973, sent back among its data, a picture of Ganymede, Jupiter's largest satellite. With a mass twice that of our Moon, Ganymede is the most massive satellite in the Solar system.

The picture is very fuzzy indeed, but until now all that has ever been seen of Ganymede by any instrument, has been a point of light or, at best, a small faintly shadow-marked disc. This new picture, then, represents an enormous advance.

The picture seems to show something equivalent to a large Lunar sea ("mare") about Ganymede's north pole, and a smaller one near its equator. There are also signs of large craters.

Pioneer 11, which is on its way to Jupiter as I write, may tell us more and, I suspect, we are in for more surprises.

Ganymede and Callisto, the two outer ones of Jupiter's four large satellites, have such low densities that it is expected they are made up largely of water-ice and ammonia-ice. The Olympian Snows that we lost on Mars may reappear here, then, in enormous quantity.

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Mary-Carter Roberts is a former book editor of the *Washington Star*, has published two novels and written for many magazines, including the *New Yorker, Colliers, Woman's Day*. She became State Travel Writer of Maryland in 1955, retired in 1969, "on which occasion the legislature accorded me the title of State Travel Writer Emeritus. I am not sure, but I imagine that I am the only one of that species in the country."

He Descended Into Hell

by MARY-CARTER ROBERTS

At about the sixth hour, the thief who was hanging on the cross at Jesus' left turned his head, as well as he was able, and said to the dying Lord, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us."

He spoke with utter straightforwardness. He wanted to be saved, and he included his companions in his wish without thinking. If he had had any power at all at the moment, he would have used it as he implored Jesus to use His — he would have saved himself and them.

But Jesus did not answer, and the thief easily relinquished the idea in which, if he had not been dying, he would never have put any hope anyway. He had heard, in jail, that he was to be executed in company with a prophet, and then he had heard that the prophet was even being called the Son of God. But at the time he had paid the word little heed. He knew jails. He was an old habitue of them, and he did not have to think to realize that they were not places where you found any such Being as God's Own Son. No, most certainly not. If, then, this Jesus was being called that, it meant only that he was some poor fakir, probably self mad, who had gone too far. Another one whose luck had run out, the thief had thought, without noticing. There were three of them, that Passover Eve. It was not many. Often, at the same spot, he had seen a good dozen crosses standing up against the sky.

Sometimes he had known several of the crucified too, fellow denizens of Jerusalem's underworld, occasionally lifelong acquaintances. Yet, when his own luck finally failed, it was with two strangers that he had come to his end. That he did not think much about it was natural. His agony was enough for him.

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It was more horrible than he had been able to imagine, even with the sight of other men in its throes fairly familiar to him. He was not young — he was in his mid forties — but he was powerful of build and strong. He knew that his torment would last a long time. And so six hours passed, and he did not lose consciousness. Then he noticed, through the nightmare of his pain, as one might see something through a break in a surrounding wall of flame, that there were people standing down below, addressing themselves to the man whom he still thought of as the fakir. And, in the same terrible way, he heard what they were saying. They were taunting the fakir with his pretense of being the Christ.

"He saved others," they said. "Let him save himself."

He saved others? thought the thief. And he had turned his head and spoken. Save yourself, indeed, was his idea, and, if it be possible — oh, save us too. Save — save. But Jesus made no reply and the thief returned to his agony. It was from the cross on the right that a voice spoke next, and, for its fury and desperation, it startled the left-hand thief even in his near extinction.

"Dost thou not fear God?" it demanded, and he realized that the question was being hurled at himself. "We receive the due reward of our deeds," the voice went on. "But this man hath done nothing amiss."

Then the rage went out of it and the voice became a gasp of supplication. "Jesus, Lord," it said, "when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom, remember me."

And so intense was the plea, the left-hand thief waited in suspense for Jesus' answer. He remembered then his fellow malefactor's appearance — how he was tense and slight of build, as one whose nerves were all too sensitive, not, like his own, slow and phlegmatic — and he thought, it's bad for him, poor guy. Then Jesus spoke in reply, and the left-hand thief felt a queer abashed relief. That'll help him, he thought. It's a hope. He'll have it to live for — as long as he lives at all.

And his mind blurred as he tried to determine whether, properly weighed, his fellow thief had the hope to live for or to die for, seeing how he was situated. And then, after a while, he thought with shame of his own stupidity, for he saw that, whether it was for living or dying, it was something — and he did not have it.

"It never would have occurred to me to ask," he sighed, as well as a man nailed to crossed timbers can sigh. "That's the way I am. I've thrown my chances away. All my life."

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And after that he fainted, and, so, presently he died.

And with him died Jesus, to Whose universal drama he was so humble a property. They left the world of men and set out on the next stage of the progress that is described in the Holy Creed — they descended into hell.

Now it is not generally known how one approaches that destination, and the reason is a sound one, for the road to hell is different to every person who takes it. It is no more than this — the damned, setting out, traverse exactly the route by which they came to their damnation; each one of them, that is to say, in going to hell, walks along a path that seems to carry him back through his mortal life, through the sins he committed, through the scenes of weakness and folly which, added together, spell out his doom. Thus through the years to childhood — to innocence. And when that stage is reached — why, there stand the gates of hell. And there is no escape.

That is the road, and on it the thief, who had been a lawbreaker and criminal all his life, set out, unsuspecting. His dying estimate of his career had been a true one. He had always thrown his chances away. He had never worked hard or earnestly at anything. He had not even been a good businesslike thief. He had done what he liked to do, as far as he had enjoyed a choice, and that was, from any useful point of view, nothing. For what he liked was just to loaf in the sun and look at his fellow beings. He had spent years of his life doing that alone.

There were, for instance, the crowds that poured constantly through the city gates. He never tired of watching them. He had found a comfortable spot on the roof of a stable that stood not far from the great gate, and there he would go, day after day, to lie and enjoy himself. It had been his pleasure. The warm tiles under him, their edges pressing into his flesh through his clothes, the sun on his back, the smells and sounds of the animals beneath the roof, their soft blowing and stamping, their rustling as they pulled at their hay — these things had given him a delicious physical content. And his faculty of wonder had been fed abundantly through the spectacle of the people.

Oh, the thief would think, what a lot of things there were to see, anyway! Lords and great men, carried along on litters by ambling slaves, or riding superb mincing steeds, spreading all about them their wonderful satisfaction in their power and freedom — they dazzled him. And merchants bringing in their goods — how rich in wonder they were; whether they bore humble shoulder packs or directed

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long lines of nodding camels, they captured the thief's imagination by the intricate processes they represented. And there were the farmers from the countryside too, driving donkies and carts and accompanied by their sun-burned wives, anxious about the city markets — you could see them arm themselves with nervous hardness as soon as they came into the city's bounds. And, of course, from time to time there would be a company of soldiers — Romans — compact and definite in the amorphous throng, a sharp human rectangle composed of hard-bodied young men whose arrogant dash and gay jingle were quite contradicted by their faces, which were not gay, as the thief could see, or arrogant either, but only bored and blank. And always the unceasing push of foot travelers, some typical, some mysteriously unassortable, some aliens in fantastic dress, some brown-skinned, some black.

A change went over all the faces as the faces' owners came in through the gate. The thief became used to seeing it and thought about it a good deal. It was a sort of bright aging. The travelers, as they approached, had on them still the look of traveling, the soft enchanted look of wonder. But, as they entered the town — their destination — they became, as with a deliberate effort, alert and hard. It was like seeing your imagination of a man turn suddenly into the actual man, the thief would think. There the actual man was before you, and all uncertainties disappeared. He was perfectly definite for you to see — and somehow no longer interesting. The thief knew, or thought he knew, what it was that made the travelers undergo this change. They had come, every one of them, to Jerusalem on some kind of business. Entering the city, they began to think of the business' prosecution. It put a limitation on their spirits.

Business, the thief would sigh, in sorrowful wonder. Business ruined living. And it was something practically everybody had. There seemed to be no escape from it.

Even himself, he had his thieving to attend to, dislike it though he did. When he got too hungry, or was shamed by his friends' derision of his indolence, he would devote himself to business for a while. He would snatch somebody's purse or wait around a food stall for a chance to grab a loaf or a fruit, and so he would pay his tribute to business' requirements. It would be a small operation. He never even wanted to try anything big — the burglary of a rich house or the waylaying of a messenger known to be carrying money. He had had opportunities to engage in such large undertakings; his

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friends often invited him to join them in serious profitable crime, to get up some ambition and show a little initiative, as they put it. Look, they would say to him, you could go far if you would only apply yourself. You are strong and quick and you are not a coward. You could go far. But he always refused such propositions. He did not want to apply himself. He liked to look on and loaf. He threw his good chances away.

And of course it came out just as his friends said it would. They nail you as high for a little job as a big one, they told him. They were right. He had been caught a number of times; he had been jailed and scourged; he got a record. He became known as an old offender. He reached the end of his rope. He was crucified. All because of business! Because of the wretched affair of earning enough to live. He set out for hell.

The first scene of his mortal life through which the road carried him was the trial at which he had been condemned to death. He witnessed it this second time in a manner that had not been possible to him the first; he saw and understood, that is to say, not only his own thoughts but those of all the people present. That is the peculiar privilege of the damned — that combined with impotence to affect a thing in the event that is being re-enacted.

So he saw himself standing before his judge, in fetters but not without hope. He had been guilty and he had been caught red-handed. He knew therefore that he would not get off without a severe sentence, but he did not really expect to be sent to his death. For, even on his own modest scale, his crime had been a little one, unpremeditated, virtually an act of impulse. He had taken a woman's nearly empty purse.

She had been a young matron, pretty and well-dressed, leading a little girl by the hand and a few months gone with another child, doing her marketing, very serious about getting the nicest quality of everything for a price that would demonstrate her shrewdness. Clean, sweet and neat, she was. He had followed her about for some time, not planning to rob her, just entertained by the profound importance she put into her household buying. Himself a picker-up of crusts and, at times, a scavenger in refuse heaps, he had found the firmness with which this young woman demanded the best melons (for the price of the worst) refreshing. And, as was always so with him when he paid attention to a fellow being, he began to imagine what her life must be.

She would have a comfortably fixed husband, of course, and one who doted on her too, seeing how

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much freedom she had and how fine her earrings and bracelets were. She would have a good house to live in and several slaves — and, the thief thought, she would not be too easy on those slaves either. She would enjoy giving orders; she would enjoy decreeing punishments, confident always that her decrees were perfectly right. She would like being boss. But, as long as everything went her way, she would be kind and gracious. Oh, yes. You could see that. She was kind and gracious to the shop men who bowed and scraped to her. But she took their obsequiousness as if it were her natural right and gave her grace in return as if it were a charity. Well, she would enjoy being charitable too. She would miss it if there were no inferiors in the world to receive her occasional bounties.

Round the market the young woman had walked, carrying herself like a queen. Clearly she was sure she was better than anyone else in the place. Why? the thief had wondered idly. Because she had earrings of the finest gold? Because she had a comfortably fixed husband? Because she had a little girl? Because she was with child? Because she was pretty? Because she was young? Why? Why on earth? He thought of his own mother, who had painstakingly taught him to steal, who, dying when she was not much older than this beautiful young lady, had had for her last thought to care for his education, to give him to a good master criminal. His mother had been humble and desperate all the days of her life. To cringe had been a natural movement with her. How erectly this other mother bore herself!

Well, he had taken her purse, though he had seen that she had spent most of her money. And she had shrieked like a scalded cat. They caught him before he had run a hundred feet. And the injured young matron had said that such people ought to be crucified — yes, crucified — it would just serve them right. While the ring of sympathetic spectators had nodded agreeingly.

So he was guilty. But still he had thought he might get off with another scourging or a spell in the galleys, at the worst. It was the judge's face, he remembered, as he started along his road to hell, that had made him have that hope. The judge had looked like a cautious, careful-thinking man. He had certainly seemed to listen with care while the arresting officer's report was being read; he had written some things down, so that the thief had supposed he had been making notes. Ah, what a lot there was in the law, the thief had thought, watching the learned man's moving

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hand. Perhaps in this case of his some fine point was involved: Who could know? Walking his road to hell, he got his answer to those questions. From that vantage point, he perceived that the judge had been drawing a picture.

He had not been making notes at all. He had been sketching a series of cartoons of a fat woman trying to catch a flea. They were really quite funny — sometimes the bug jumped from the ground at the woman's ankles or knees, sometimes it leaped down on her from above, and the judge put real vivacity into her swoops of pursuit. He gave his full attention to this work of art. He simply did not hear what was being said about the thief at all.

But he lifted his head from his drawing, grave and dispassionate of eye, when the report was finished. His clerk leaned forward then and whispered to him, "Old offender, your honor. Habitual thief. Four previous convictions."

"Guilty," said the judge. "Crucifixion. Case dismissed."

That was how it had been. That was the thief's first revelation. The road to hell is a long one when it has to take in more than forty years, and, for the thief, all the rest of it was in keeping. He could make but one thing out of the knowledge that his journey brought him, and that was that he had always done the wrong thing and that he never could have done anything except the thing he did.

"I don't understand it," he thought. And on that appropriate reflection he entered hell.

To his utter amazement, it looked exactly like the place where he had spent his mortal life. Hell, as far as he could see, was Jerusalem.

The portal through which he entered was even his favorite Jerusalem gate — the great one — and there, he saw, rubbing his unbelieving eyes, was the very stable on the roof of which he had been wont to lie. The same Roman centurion was on duty in the guardhouse on the wall, the same soldiers, bored into facelessness, stood lounging sturdily about. There, before the gate, lay the plaza, every paving stone of which was familiar to him; beyond it was the market where he had taken the young lady's purse, and farther off he could see the roofs of the government buildings where he had been tried and condemned. No doubt, if he climbed the wall and looked in the right direction, he would see Golgotha. Would his cross still be standing there? Himself nailed to it?

He looked down at his body. He was dressed, he saw, as he used to dress; they had stripped him for crucifixion, but now he had his

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clothes and sandals back again. He stared at the people pouring slowly in at the gate. It was the Jerusalem crowd — yes. Who would know it if he did not? The travelers came on in the dependable motleyness that had formerly delighted him; they lifted up their heads as they entered the town, and they changed as they had used to change. Were they preparing themselves for business in this place, then — for business in hell: Was there business in hell? Did they all understand, all know, all except himself? Understand? Understand what? The thief turned blindly to a passer-by. "What city is this?" he asked.

With the putting of the question he found himself looking into the passer-by's eyes, looking as if he had never looked at any other thing. They were large eyes, very clear and pale in color, and they simply swallowed him up. It occurred to him then that, although he had been staring at the crowd for some moments, he had not seen the owner of those eyes in it. The man seemed to have arrived at his elbow very suddenly. He was a well-dressed person, one whom the thief, if he had not been bewildered to despair, would never have dared to address. He was handsome too, except that his face was rather too full and regular an oval and that he had almost no color about him. He was silvery pale. He answered the thief immediately.

"What city do you come from?" he inquired.

"From Jerusalem," the thief replied.

"Then, to you, this is Jerusalem," said the stranger. "It is all places to all men. It is hell."

"It is hell?" the thief repeated.

"It is hell," nodded the stranger. "I can assure you of that. I myself happen to be one of the native inhabitants."

A devil, thought the thief. A fiend. But he was not frightened. There was something before him worse than any fiend. The pale and full-faced creature who admitted his fiendship even seemed friendly, by contrast to that unknown.

"What," he asked, "does a man do in hell?"

"What did you do in Jerusalem?" inquired the fiend politely.

The thief thought of the answers he might make — I loafed — I lay in the sun — I looked at people — I wondered about things. But he knew the fiend was not asking about those occupations. The fiend was asking him what business he had followed. It would be business, of course, that would interest a fiend.

"I stole," he said.

The fiend nodded again. "Then steal here," he answered. "The essence of hell, you see, is that you go on committing your sins in it.

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Forever, that is to say. To the end of Time."

"But I do not want to steal!" cried the thief, and his voice rose in a scream, though he had not screamed when, lifted up on the cross, he had felt for the first time his weight pull down on the nails. "I never wanted to steal. I hated stealing."

"You stole, though," observed the fiend.

"I stole," cried the thief, "but I never wanted to. I had to get my living. I stole for that. I only stole when I had to. I hated it, I tell you. I was born a thief — and all my life I hated thieving. Hated it!" And he raised his fists and brandished them before the fiend's countenance.

But that being only shook his head a little and murmured, in a voice as pale and silvery as himself, "Yes. This is hell." And then, when the thief went on staring at him, he put a question. "Did you expect to go to heaven?"

"No," said the thief, abashed. "I knew I had no chance for that."

"Well, then," continued the fiend, "did you expect that hell would be arranged to suit your preferences? After all, that is not its reputation."

"I thought it would be different," replied the thief.

"It is not." The fiend shook his head again. "The one thing it never is is that. Many people, like yourself, are disappointed on the matter. But the essence of hell is its sameness. It is all places to all men in order that it may be one place to all men — the same place to every separate one. Hell, that is to say. To the end of Time — hell."

The thief groaned, covering his face with his hands. "I could repent," he said. "I could go on to the end of Time, repenting."

"Oh, rather — steal." The fiend spoke graciously. Then he vanished. It was the only supernatural manifestation that the thief beheld in his new environment. Apart from it, everything went on precisely as it had used to go on in the world.

The people kept on coming through the gate, the markets operated, the guard changed, the wind blew, the sun shone, the customary dust, smells and noises rose up from the city streets. There was no suggestion of unreality anywhere — except, that was, in the mind of the thief. He knew now that the solid city was no city at all, but only a phantom in which he was trapped, forever. To steal. Forever.

"I won't do it," he said to himself. "I defy hell."

He had never defied the world. He had followed the world's rules obediently. Born a thief, he had duly stolen. Because, as he now perceived, he had privately regarded the world as a temporary

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matter. He had never definitely thought it out, but he had held in his mind a vague belief that sometime, somewhere, he would come on a better system, would find rules that he could follow with happiness. Where? As the fiend had reminded him, he had not hoped for heaven. Still, he had hoped. Or believed. And so he had conformed. Now, in hell, he had the reward of his hope, his belief, his conformity. It made a rebel of him for the first time in his existence.

He looked bitterly at the stable. "They put it there," he said to himself, "so I would start in doing as I used to. They think I'll climb up on the roof and stay until I get hungry. Then they think I'll go over to the market and make a snatch. I won't. They can't make me."

He turned and walked away from the plaza, going in the direction opposite from the market. For hours then he wandered through the streets of the false Jerusalem. In only one respect could he discern that it differed from the real one. That was that, in the false city, opportunities for making a snatch were plentiful. Shopkeepers left their goods unwatched for long seconds at a time. Well-dressed citizens walked the streets letting their purses dangle recklessly. Casements of rich houses stood unguarded. Food and money, obviously, could be picked up here with little trouble. It moved the thief to fury.

"Make it ten times easier," he muttered. "Still I won't."

He wandered for the rest of the day. The night he spent in a remembered refuge under a bridge. The next day he wandered again, but by noon he found himself plagued by hunger and weariness. What, he wondered did a man do to get a living, if he did not steal? Why, he worked at some other business.

He knew no other business. He was strong though, and so he decided to try being a porter. He could carry burdens like an animal. At least he could do that.

So, during the remarkably long afternoon that followed, he trudged about beseeching merchants to let him shift their bales or marketing citizens to permit him to carry their purchases to their homes. He had no success. No one in the city would give him work in the porter business.

Then, as the day was beginning to wane, he came along a street where men were building a house. An angry foreman was bawling at a gang of slaves. The contractor's agreement, that man was saying, called for the wall to be so high that day. If they did not raise it to the specified height, the foreman would lose his money. Did they want that to happen? He alternately lashed

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the slaves and cajolingly called on them to be good boys and put their backs into it. They were lifting stones from the ground and passing them up a human chain to the wall top. Anyone could see they were short-handed.

The thief stepped up to the foreman. "If you need another man, sir," he said, "I'm strong."

The foreman gave the briefest possible glance at his burly shoulders and big arms. "Get in there then," he grunted, jerking a thumb toward a place in the human chain.

So, until sunset, the thief passed the heavy stones along. He exerted himself too, calling on all his strength. His thought was that, if he showed the foreman that he was no shirker, the foreman would take him on the next day as well. But when, after quitting, he stepped into the line of slaves that was moving up to the stew pot, the foreman turned him away. "My contract don't call for feeding you," he said.

The thief thought hard. He did not want to make this important person angry. "No, sir," he said. "Will you pay me wages, then?"

"My contract don't call for no wages," replied the foreman.

"I'll work cheap," said the thief. "I'll come back tomorrow too."

The foreman laughed. "Tomorrow!" he exclaimed pleasedly. "Listen, you. I finished *my* contract today. That's all I wanted. I'm through, I'm quitting this job tonight. No, you don't get no wages. I never hired you. I never seen you. Get out, now. Scram."

"Devil!" choked the thief — and then remembered.

Of course this man was a devil. They were all devils, all the mock citizens of this mock Jerusalem — they were devils masquerading for his bedevilment. The crowds at the gate, the men and women in the streets, the centurion on the wall, even the slaves around the stew pot — not one of them was a human being. He was the only human being in the place. He was alone in hell. He would be alone there until the end of Time.

He turned and ran. He ran and went on running. For miles he fled through the mock city's mock streets. He came back at last to the city's mock gate. It was dark by then. He halted in the center of the empty flare-lit plaza and clenched his fists at the portal.

"They needn't think I'm going to stand it," he told himself in a lonely climax of rebellion. "I'll leave their hell."

Since it was night, the gate was closed, but he, an old Jerusalem hand, knew a thing or two. He did not need a gate, not he. He hurried along to a place familiar to him

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where you could jump down from a roof to the city wall top, and, by watching the patrol, climb thence to the ground without. The Romans were not really very careful, anyway. They were great sticklers for order, but in little matters it was mainly form with them. They knew no *army* was going to assault Jerusalem, and so what if an occasional nightbird did fly out over their heads? The thief thought this routinely as he climbed to the roof, and then stopped, alike in his climbing and thinking. The Romans here, of course, were not the Romans at all. They too were devils. How was he to know that any such escape as he was planning was possible?

Most likely, when he reached the wall and looked out, he would see only another plaza lying down before him, another stable, another marketplace — another false Jerusalem, going on forever. The thought was more than he could bear. He sank down on the roof over which he was crawling until he lay prone, his head on his arms. He recognized then that he could not bring himself to make the test, he did not dare to go out on the wall and look. If he did go, and saw only a second illusory city before him, an infinity of territory existing for the sake of his thievery and for no other reason in the universe, he would not be able to endure it. And what would he do then? What did a man do in hell when he could endure hell no longer?

The thief found an answer to the question. He had closed his eyes as he lay on his face; he began now to rise but he kept his eyes shut. For he had decided to go out on the wall and fling himself *blindly* down. He would perform the act of self-destruction. And if — in hell — he proved to be indestructible, he would perform it again. He would perform it a thousand times. It was the only answer left to him — unless he conformed to hell, as he had conformed to the world. He would not. He was through conforming.

He crept forward across the roof. He knew the footing well. He had often used the route in his life, usually at night when he could not see anyway, and so he was not inconvenienced by his self-imposed blindness. He reached the roof's edge and, without hesitation, swung out and down. He had a brief fall and then his feet struck the wall top. So far, so good. There was nothing before him now but a drop of about a hundred feet. Whether they had left the country outside the wall the way it used to be, or had set up that second false city would make no difference, for, whatever was below, the drop would surely kill him. (But you are already dead, said his mind. He

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would not listen to it.) He sank to his hands and knees and began to crawl forward. As soon as his fingers reached the edge of the wall, he thought, he would stand up and leap. His fingers reached the edge. He stood up.

Then, in spite of himself, he had an impulse to look, a plain curiosity to know whether the torture invoked against him was as he had assumed, or even more ingenious. He did not waver in his resolution to die, but he thought he would die with his eyes open.

"They can't scare me," he told himself. "I can look at the worst thing they can think of."

So, poised on the edge of the wall, he opened his eyes. What he saw immediately before him was an expanse of soft darkness, mere uneventful night, as peaceful as a cradle. That ended perhaps half a mile away where the earth, evidently rising to a hill, met a pallid sky. Colorlessly vivid against that sky, there stood three crosses. The thief knew then. The one on the left was his own.

He did not jump. He climbed down, and, hurrying and stumbling, he toiled up the hill of Golgotha. And, as he went, he struggled to remember. There had been something in his mind when he was dying. A hope. A hope to live for? To die for. But — a hope! A hope of what? Someone had said something. "Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

He rushed on and, as he went, his memory cleared and he began to see the scene of his death coherently. There had been a prophet there, dying with him for some reason or other. And there had been another thief. And the prophet had saved the other thief from hell, or had promised to, had given him the hope of being saved, at least. Yes, that was where the hope had come into it. The prophet had said the other thief would go to heaven. The other thief! The thief on the right hand! The left-hand thief, stumbling and running up the hill, beat his clenched fists against his forehead. "It could have been me," he groaned, "if I had only thought to ask him."

He was full of bitterness against the right-hand thief, who *had* thought to make the plea. All his life it had been that way. He had held his peace, watched the drift of his dreamy thoughts in silence, lived his inner life in solitude and his outer one haphazardly, never once entertaining the idea that the two might be brought together, and so — losing the rewards of both. For his outer life, his thievery, he had been scourged and killed. For his inner — his love of wondering about his mysterious fellow men — he had been accounted lazy and worthless, and, on the very cross of

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death, cheated. For that was how it seemed to him. If, in that final moment, he thought, he had brought his two lives together, had, as a physically dying thief, spoken in terms of the still vital wonderer, then he might have atoned for the long disunion, might have erased the record of his divided being and become himself at last. And, if that had happened, he thought, he would not have been sent to hell. They would not send whole souls to hell! Hell was the place where those who had betrayed their wholeness were condemned to live in terms of the betrayal. You denied yourself in the world, and your punishment was to live in terms of the denial forever.

But he had had a last chance (maybe everybody had a similar one?) and he had lost it. Another man had taken it.

"I'll get it from him," thought the thief, storming up the dark hill. "I'll take it away from him. I'll have it if I have to climb his cross and choke him. He shant keep it. It's going to be mine."

It was the first time in his existence that he had had a possessive passion.

He was near the top of the hill by then, and there the slope became extremely steep. But he could not bear to slacken his furious haste, and so he gave every vestige of his attention to his scramble upward. He leapt and lunged over the precipitous ground, swearing at the stones that slid under his feet and stooping until his fingers touched the earth to give himself balance. And so he reached the crosses without having raised his eyes to them. He instantly laid hold on the one to the right, bending both his powerful hands around it, actually making as if to shake that tree of death, though it was so solidly planted that it did not give him back a quiver.

"The hope!" he shouted in his fury. "You up there! I want the hope. Give it to me!"

The massive upright dissolved in his fingers and was gone as if it had been smoke. The other crosses were gone too. For a moment he was alone on Calvary. Then he saw that he was in company with another man, and he knew at once who the other man was. He was Jesus, the prophet who had died on the center cross.

He was standing where, a few moments before, His cross had stood. Like the thief, He was dressed again. He was wearing a cloak of brown and white. The thief could not see any marks of His torment on Him. He was looking at the thief and He spoke to him. "What are you doing?" He inquired.

Then, hearing Him speak, the thief knew He was indeed the Son

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of God. For the thief was no Nicodemus, with a head full of intellectuality, no Thomas, with an instinct for prosy realism. He was a simple uncorrupted wonderer. He knew. He knew — and accepted without any conscious transition of attitude. He had been importuning a fellow malefactor — and now he was talking to God's Son. It was, with him, as simple as that.

"I came to get the hope," he said. He gestured toward the site of the vanished right-hand cross. "He took it," he continued. "I came to get it from him."

It was not his thought to lay his troubles before the divine Being. He spoke instead from obedience. Go's Son had asked a question of him. He answered. Having answered, he possessed himself in quiet.

"That," said Jesus, "was the hope of escape from this place, was it not? The hope of becoming yourself at last?"

"Yes," replied the thief.

"You were tired of stealing," said Jesus, "and you wanted the hope that you might cease to steal?"

"Yes," replied the thief.

"And you came to get it?"

The thief assented silently.

"Was it your hope?" Jesus asked him then. "Did it not belong to the other man?"

The thief stared at Him.

"You came to take it from him," Jesus went on. "You came to steal."

The thief looked down into the abyss the words opened before him. He could think of nothing. For a long time he looked. Then he shivered. "But what am I to do?" he asked. "There —" he gestured as if toward an actual object — "there is Eternity."

"Well," said Jesus. He seated Himself on the ground and motioned to the thief to do the same. The thief sat down before Him. It was still the hilltop, though the crosses were gone.

The city still lay below, too. Its battlements and towers were thick and dark in the think night air. Its widely spaced flares burned, though languidly. And now the thief had a smiting perception of the town — streets, plazas, alleys, winding ways, walls, pavements, colors, shadows, lights — all of it, as if it were somehow contained inside his head, not seen through his eyes, not entering his brain in any way, but within him already, graven and complete. It was the only place he had ever known. And now, with its essence perfect in him, he was confronted by an embodiment that was false, that was a spot of evil illusion made for the most evil of all purposes — torment. He buried his face in his hands, and for the first time he wept. "I am in

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hell," he whispered.

Jesus said, "You know who I am," and spoke not as one asking a question but as one stating a fact. "And, you see, I too am here. I also am in hell."

The thief could only add that to his bewilderment. Still whispering, he said, "Yes. You. The Son of God. You are in hell. *Why?*"

"Business," replied Jesus, and the thief was stung by the word. "My Father's business. I am about it."

The thief thought of the scourging and of the moment when the hammer, standing in the air, had waited above the head of the first nail they drove in him, the nail for his left foot, while the clean boyish-looking Roman soldier had creased his sun-browned cheek in a squint so as to get a straight line on the stroke. He remembered the shifting of his weight when the cross had been hauled upright. He recalled the judge and the cartoons of the flea.

"You!" he said again, but this time his voice was a cry. "You! Lord, what did they make You do in hell?"

"My Father's business," Jesus repeated. "It brought me here. And, being here, I followed the custom. I did as I used to do. I preached to the people. I healed their sick, when they asked me. I rested and talked to acquaintances." He smiled. "I talked to one very old acquaintance," he said. "One whom I have known always. You spoke to him too, as you came in the gate. Lucifer."

"The Devil," whispered the thief.

Jesus nodded. "That is one of his names," He said.

"Oh — he!" exclaimed the thief. "He — ! The one who is responsible for this. This hell. The one who created evil."

"No," answered Jesus, "no — and yes. He is, as you say, responsible for this. But he did not create evil. Lucifer created nothing."

He paused, but, as the thief did not speak, He went on. "Lucifer cannot create," he said. "Lucifer is one who hungers after metes and bounds. Limitations. Lucifer has to measure himself against something — always — and so he requires measurements. Circumscriptions. For that reason, he invented Time. That is all he did. He created nothing. Creation is limitless. It is eternal."

"He did not create evil?" cried the thief. "But he *is* evil!" He hesitated and then asked humbly, "Is he not?"

"Opposites, analogies, balances," answered Jesus. "After he had invented Time, he had to fill it, for it is the great property of Time to require occupation. Evil — good.

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Right — wrong. Space — matter. Mine — thine. Heaven — hell. Life — death. These are Lucifer's devices. They have filled Time for him — and for most of humanity — since Time began. Only a few men have perceived it."

The thief, having heard this, became aware that he was undergoing pangs. They were strong, they were great, but they were not, like the pangs of death, agony. They were the reverse of it. A long moment passed. Then he said, "So heaven is in Time too."

"Since there is no evil in Eternity," replied Jesus, "there is no good either. The limitless does not require extremes."

"Then heaven is in Time too." The thief repeated it. "Heaven is in Time. Heaven?"

"Yes," said Jesus.

"But the hope!" The thief shouted it. He waved his arm toward the place where the right-hand cross had stood. "Was it for nothing after all?"

"It was subject to the conditions of Time," Jesus answered. "You refused them. Do you remember? You refused them, as far as you were able, while you lived. You refused them altogether, having died. You defied hell."

"Yes," said the thief.

"So you are here." Jesus told him. The thief knew the response. He said, "In Eternity."

There was talk after that. The thief told his story. Told what he had never told before, the long, finitely varied record of how, in Time, he had always done the same thing, the thing that was wrong for him, in Time, and yet, in Time, was the only thing possible. In all its details he told it. He lived his life again, but not now as the impotent onlooker he had been when he made his journey toward hell. Now he interpreted. Now he described.

His mother, who had done her duty by him. The young matron, who had known what was right. The soldier, who scourged men. The judge, to whom the law was an arid, hideous, interminable boredom. His fellow thief, who — like himself — had hated thievery, and — unlike himself — had longed to be respectable. All these people, many more, and their businesses. Himself, the wonderer.

Himself — yes. It was his story. It was his story, and, as he told it, he dwindled in the narrative. He appeared less and less. It was his world that he presently depicted, his world and his wonder at it. And the pangs he had been feeling — these were the rhythm of his speech and thought.

So when he ceased to talk, he was not aware of the ceasing. His story reached its end, but the power in him moved on, making its own music in silence. He was himself.

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He next knew that a change had taken place around him, and then he saw that Jesus was standing. He had not perceived a movement. Throughout his story, he had had from the seated figure opposite him a receptivity of which he had been constantly aware, an understanding counterpoint to his words. He had rested on that. Now the seated figure was gone. Jesus was erect, light-footed and joyous, a visible god. The thief felt a love and gratitude that filled him utterly. And he wondered at the wonder of the fulfillment.

"In Time, time continues," Jesus told him then. "And I must return to it. The third day approaches and I must go to the garden where I was entombed and show my resurrected body to my disciples, who will be coming. You — your death now being ended — do you understand?"

"Yes," said the thief.

"Everything?" asked Jesus.

"No," said the thief.

Jesus said nothing. He waited. The thief pronounced one word — *"Why?"*

He knew then that his Friend, though he was still there, was also departing. In Eternity, where there is neither place nor motion, such a mystery is possible. His eyes raptly on Jesus' face, he waited. He saw that Jesus smiled. He answered, "That is my Father's business. God knows." And with those words, the mystery was completed.

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A short but stinging left jab from Ms. Russ, whose new novel, THE FEMALE MAN, was recently published by Bantam Books.

Risk

by JOANNA RUSS

He didn't like this future world, oh no he didn't, our old friend John Hemingway London Rockne Knievel Dickey Wayne. It wasn't risky enough. He had been a racing-car driver way back then (before he was frozen) and he couldn't stand cars that protected you in head-on collisions and roads that wouldn't let you collide with anything in the first place. Nor did he like the medical advances which had made it impossible to die of anything (except extreme old age) or the sports they practiced for health and fun (but never for danger). Nor was it possible to be better at something than anybody else. That is, you could be, but who cared? He wanted to go deep-sea diving, glider crashing, mountain-climbing, alligator-wrestling, lion-shooting, novel-writing, and even worse things. So he went before a parliament of these sensitive-but-bland men and women who had resurrected him from the cryogenics chambers of an earlier day and said loudly, legs planted far apart (he favored the one with the silver pins in it a little, though):

"MAN IS NOT MAN WITHOUT RISK!"

Then he said, even louder:

"MANHOOD — IDENTITY — EVEN LIFE ITSELF — DEMAND THE CONSTANT TEST OF DANGER!"

They said, "Oh dear." Their eyes got very round. They murmured worriedly amongst themselves. He thought he might have to throw a temper tantrum (the kind he used to put on so well in front of the news cameras) but that proved unnecessary. They debated politely. They put their hands over their faces. They said most of the unfrozen people seemed to like this new world. They said there really was no accounting for tastes, was there, after all.

But finally they said, Very well; you shall have your Risk.

And they inoculated him with Bubonic Plague.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 10

In the February issue we asked for unlikely and humorous Ace Doubles or Triples. A huge response, and again, the main problem in judging was the large number of repeats, for instance:

No Blade of Grass/The Sheep Look Up
Beyond/Beyond the Beyond
Pebble In the Sky/The Stone That Never Came Down
Who Can Replace A Man?/I, Robot
Starship Troopers/The Marching Morons
Denver Is Missing/Cities In Flight
Gravy Planet/The Man Who Ate the World
The Early Asimov/I Am Legend
Memoirs Found In A Bathtub/Lord of The Rings

Thanks to those inventive souls who sent in dialogues, even complete stories made up of titles. But where are all the suggestions for future competitions? C'mon now, we're counting on you. Here are the winners:

FIRST PRIZE

The Carefully Considered Rape of the World/The Girl, the Gold Watch and Everything
Food of the Gods/Sundog
Odd John/Holding Your Eight Hands
Breakfast of Champions/Venus on the Half Shell

Janice L. Presser

SECOND PRIZE

Froomb/Zotz
SF Hall of Fame/All Judgment Fled
The World of Fanzines/The Necronomicon
Make Room! Make Room!/The Man Who Folded Himself*

Albany State SF Society
*Also from others

RUNNER UP

Where Is the Bird Of Fire?/20,000 Leagues Under the Sea
Sturgeon Is Alive and Well/Who?
Where Were You Last Pluterday/Ten Thousand Light Years From Home*
The Last Dangerous Visions/Where Do We Go From Here?

Mark Robert Kelly

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Dangerous Visions/Dandelion Wine/Again, Dangerous Visions
Dune/Killdozer/Flatland

Bruce Berges

Count Von Schimmelhorn and the Time Pony/Strange Bedfellows/Brother Dodo's Revenge

Minda Zetlin

Metamorphosis/Bug Jack Barron
The Red Peril/The Scarlet Plague/Marooned
The Singing Bell/Ringworld

Donald Franson

The Seventeen Virgins/Whatever Happened to Nick Neptune?
The Universe Maker/Patent Pending

Joseph M. Szafran

Can You Feel Anything When I Do

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This?/God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater
The Book of Skulls/Fun With Your New Head
Steven Utley

The Third Ear/Big Ball of Wax
Time Enough For Love/The Unending Night
John A. Presser

Foundation/Quicksand/Second Foundation
Huan Lee

Flies/They Bite
Josiah F. Hill

The Far Call/334/2001
E. Hunt

The Cosmic Engineers/Sacred Locomotive Flies
Sue Anderson

COMPETITION 11 (suggested by Barry Malzberg)

"Then all along," Calkins said reverently, "all along, every step of the way, Rona Haskell was not a woman but a *robot.*"

"That's right," Willis said. "That's right."

"And I could have —"

"Say no more," said Willis quietly, "it's all over now." He took the beaker from the rack and poured its dreadful contents away with a hiss.

"No more," said Calkins. "No more."

There was a hush in the room.

Far above them, yet so near it could have come from inside, they thought they heard the sound of rippling feminine laughter.

Above, the final paragraphs of a science-fiction story you would rather not have read. In 100 words or less, turn in something similarly unpromising.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by June 10. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, Six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 11 will appear in the October issue.

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